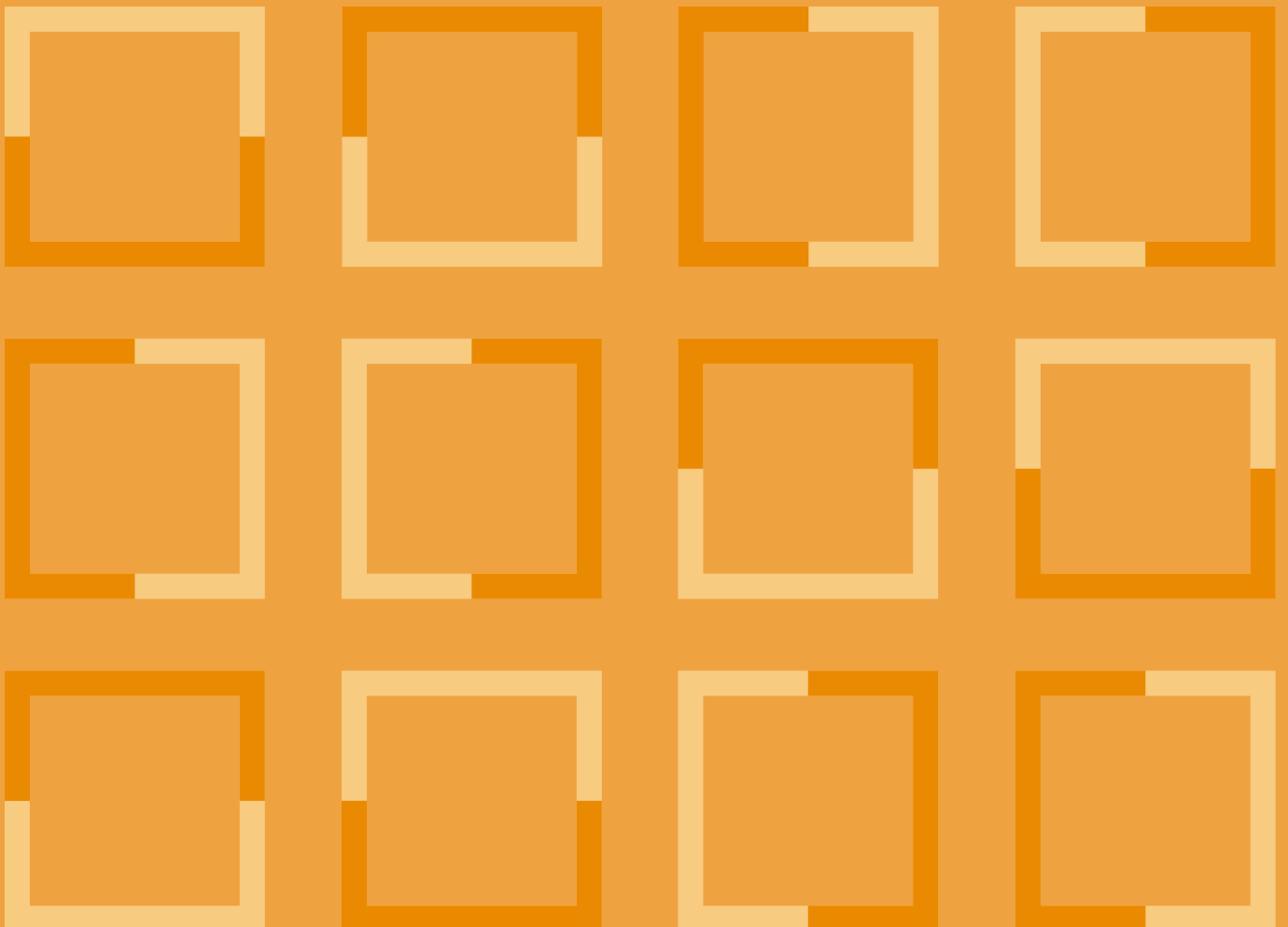


Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes

An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society?

October 2019

PROGRESS REPORT

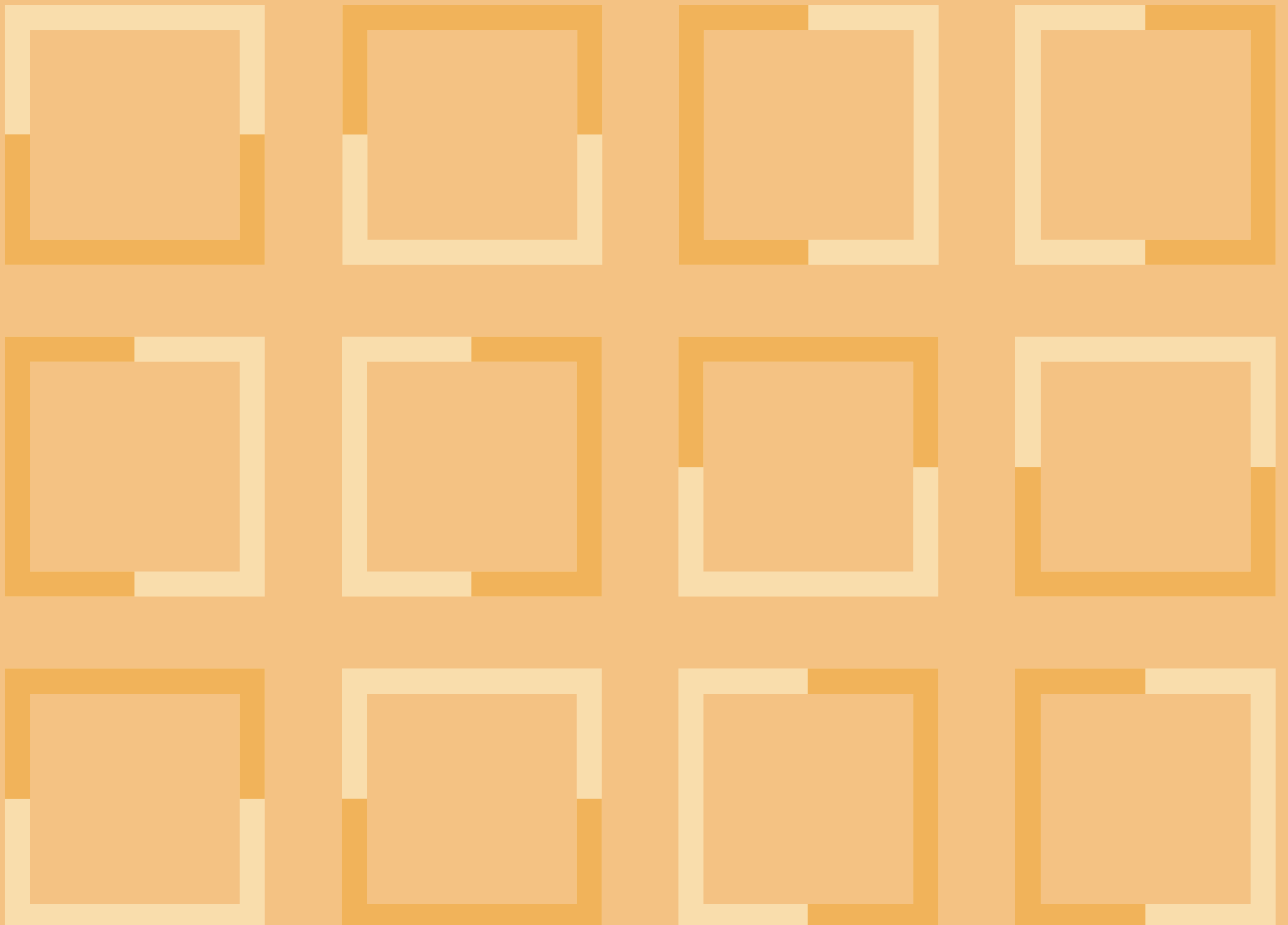


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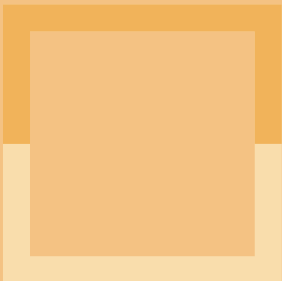
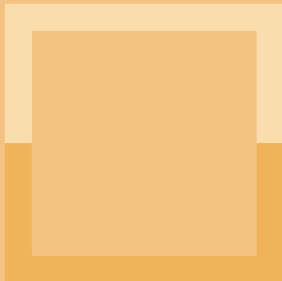
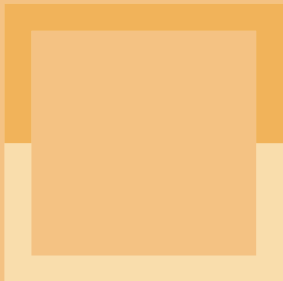
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Acronymns

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CEUD	Centre for Excellence in Universal Design
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EA	Education Assistant
EU	European Union
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ERSI	Economic and Social Research Institute
GLD	General learning disability
HSE	Health Service Executive
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network
ISL	Irish Sign Language
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NB	New Brunswick
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NQTs	Newly Qualified Teachers
OT	Occupational Therapists
PECS	Picture Exchange Communication System
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SET	Special Education Teacher
SCLN	Speech, Language and Communication Need
SIM	School Inclusion Model
SLD	Specific Learning Disability
SLT	Speech and Language Therapist
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSLD	Specific Speech and Language Disorder
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Executive Summary



Background

In 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, T.D., requested the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to advise on the educational provision that should be in place for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them achieve better outcomes.

The full terms of reference for the policy advice are set out in Appendix 1.

It was agreed that the report will be completed and submitted to the Minister by June 2020. The NCSE was also requested to provide the Minister with a progress report by end September 2019.

This progress report summarises NCSE's progress to date in preparing its advice by setting out:

- Emerging findings from a preliminary analysis of information from the consultation and research strands of the review.
- Steps towards completing the policy advice for submission to Minister.

The NCSE last advised the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on the future role of special schools and classes in February 2011¹. At that time, in line with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, we recommended locally based special classes in mainstream schools or special schools located on mainstream campuses as the best way forward for students where placement in a mainstream setting was deemed not to be in their best interests or to be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for other students.

From 2011 to 2019...

But much has changed in the educational landscape since the publication of NCSE's previous policy advice on special schools and classes in 2011 and some of the key changes include:

- **Increased provision for students with special educational needs**

Between 2011 and 2019, the overall student population in schools increased by **7.5 per cent** while during the same time period:

- Government expenditure on special education increased by **46 per cent**
- Special education as a percentage of the total education budget increased by **12.7 per cent**
- Additional teaching posts for special education increased by **46 per cent**
- Special Needs Assistant (SNA) posts allocated increased by **51 per cent**
- Provision of special classes increased by **196 per cent**

1 NCSE (2011) The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland, NCSE Policy Advice, February 2011.

- Number of students enrolled in special classes increased by **155 per cent**
- Number of special schools has increased by **13 per cent**
- Number of students enrolled in special schools has increased by **15 per cent**.
- **Substantive improvements in the wider system of supports for students with special educational needs, including:**
 - The introduction, in September 2017, of an improved and more equitable model for allocating additional special education teaching supports to mainstream schools, based on school profile rather than individual diagnosis of disability.
 - The introduction, in July 2018, of the first ever demonstration project to bring specialised therapies (speech and language therapy and occupational therapy) into 150 preschools and schools.
 - The commencement, in October 2018, of key provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018, one of which provides the Minister with the power to compel a school to open a special class, after a number of steps have been concluded.
 - The piloting, in September 2019, of a new model of support for schools, the School Inclusion Model (SIM), which aims to build schools' capacity to include students with additional education and care needs and to provide other supports for students.
 - The introduction, by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) of learning programmes at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications for students in mainstream and special schools.
- **New obligations following the Irish Government's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).**

In 2018, the Irish Government ratified the CRPD, Article 24 (2) of which obliges States, inter alia, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.

Ireland is due to submit its first report to the UN in 2020.

The United Nations (UN) Committee that monitors implementation of the Convention has already advised that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive. However, the UN Committee acknowledges that significant change takes time to implement and accepts the concept of progressive realisation which permits countries to signal their policy intent and how the system will change over a period of time.

Given the significant changes that have taken place since 2011, it is now timely to review whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with more complex special educational needs or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward.

Ireland is not alone in considering educational provision for students in special schools and classes. Many European countries are currently thinking about what future direction they should take and are examining their provision in light of their obligations and responsibilities under the UNCRPD.

What we have done to date

The NCSE strives to ensure that our policy advice comprehensively addresses its terms of reference, and is informed by robust and wide-ranging consultative and research processes.

We have to date:

Ensured that the review has a robust research base through undertaking the following 6 research strands:

1. A review of the relevant literature from January 2000 to June 2019 that examined the impact of specialist provision and/or inclusion on the education of students, with and without disabilities.
2. A review of specialist provision for educating students with special educational needs across different jurisdictions.
3. An evaluation of ASD special class provision (conducted by DES Inspectorate).
4. A review of a sample of DES inspection reports on special schools.
5. A survey of schools on the use of special education teacher allocations.
6. A review of a sample of professional reports that recommended placement in a special class or special school.

Engaged in a widespread consultative process

We met with over 30 different stakeholder groups to discuss their views in relation to the policy advice being developed. A full list of organisations participating in consultation groups is included in Appendix 2.

NCSE council members and staff also visited 19 Irish schools (including special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary schools – with and without special classes) specifically for this review. In addition, two NCSE staff-members visited five schools in New Brunswick, Canada, to see how an education system, without special schools or special classes, supported students with special educational needs.

Council members have fully discussed the policy advice at its meetings, and invited a number of expert presentations to inform these discussions. This included three invited experts from NB who presented to Council on how the change to a more inclusive education system was effected in their province.

Engaged with the National Disability Authority (NDA) on Universal Design for School Buildings

The NCSE consulted with the NDA regarding what a design for an inclusive school should look like; what changes to the current school design would be necessary to reach this standard; and what modifications to existing school buildings might be possible to make them more inclusive.

The NDA Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) is currently developing a briefing paper outlining the possible built environment implications for inclusive schools from a Universal Design perspective. Such schools would be designed to cater for all children regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

What we have found to date

This is a progress report and therefore findings stated in this report are tentative and may change once our further analysis is complete and/or if additional information becomes available.

We found a general paucity of good quality research studies relating to most of the research questions we posed. Our initial literature search yielded 10,971 citations which were then screened for relevance, with 348 selected for further review. Approximately 90 per cent of these were excluded for a variety of reasons, including methodology, sample size or relevance to the research question, in line with generally recognised practice in conducting reviews of this nature. At the end of the screening period, 28 studies were included in the final review.

To date, we cannot draw definitive conclusions, from the literature, that one type of educational placement is better than another for children and young people with special educational needs. We can tentatively suggest that some of the more methodologically robust studies appear to indicate that students with special educational needs who are educated in mainstream settings have better short and long term outcomes than those who were in a special educational placements. Inclusive preschools appear to have a positive impact on a child's development compared to special preschools.

Eight European jurisdictions² which responded to an NCSE survey retain specialist provision as part of their education provision and notwithstanding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the intention in administrations surveyed is to maintain specialist provision, and expand it in some cases (UK finding). We were disappointed with the response rate to our survey and intend to make further contact with other jurisdictions in advance of completing the final report.

2 England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Malta, Sweden, Slovakia, Estonia.

Students with special educational needs appear to be supported well in all schools visited and seemed happy and content both in the mainstream and special settings visited. Students expressed great pride in their work and their achievements and spoke most enthusiastically about their experience in school.

The main reasons (as cited by special schools) why students attended special schools were that mainstream schools are not able to cope with the level of student's medical, behavioural and/or care needs; or students have already attended mainstream school and didn't progress there or felt very isolated.

Many of the groups consulted, to date, thought that ideally all students could, and perhaps should, be educated together in mainstream schools. Yet, most found it extremely difficult to imagine how those 2 per cent of students, currently educated in special schools or special classes, could ever be included in mainstream classes, given the level and complexity of their difficulties. They considered that specialised provision would always be required for those with the most complex medical, intellectual and behavioural difficulties. This is despite the fact that already 98 per cent of our students are educated in mainstream classes³ and that in some of the less densely populated areas of the country all students are educated together, regardless of ability or severity of need.

Mixed views were expressed about whether full inclusion in mainstream classes is even desirable. While groups acknowledged that generally students with special educational needs are supported well in schools, there was concern that many schools encounter challenges and structural deficits. As a result groups expressed fear that students with more complex needs will be included in name only and could be worse off as a result.

Other groups expressed concern that the inclusion of all students, irrespective of complexity of need, would have a negative impact on the education of their peers without disabilities. The NCSE's initial analysis of the available research evidence doesn't appear, at this point, to support this fear but rather indicates that inclusion either has a positive impact or no impact on students without special educational needs.

Over 16,000 students are educated in either a special class or special school. Their placement is based on a professional report that provides a diagnosis of disability and a statement indicating that a special school or class is a suitable placement for them. Parents make the final decision on where their child will attend school.

Many groups were concerned that educating a child in a separate specialist setting can have life-long consequences for a child and there is clear evidence that once placed there, children rarely leave this setting. While these students have individualised educational plans, aggregated data is not formally collected on their outcomes.

3 98 per cent of the student population in primary and post-primary schools attend mainstream classes, 1 per cent are enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools, while the remaining 1 per cent attend special schools.

These groups questioned if it is now the time to test the conventional thinking that children's outcomes are so much better in such schools that it justifies them being put on buses, sometime for hours to and from self-contained campuses with little opportunity to mix with children who do not have special educational needs.

We found consensus, even among those that favoured greater inclusion, that the system wasn't ready to educate all students together. Most groups considered that full inclusion in mainstream, while it could be achieved, would require a fundamental change of school culture and mind-set whereby teachers and parents reimagined school as a place where every child in the community is welcomed and educated, irrespective of need or ability. School culture would need to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right was not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational need.

Others argued strongly that special settings should be retained because it is more economic and practical to cluster students with more complex needs in one setting. Therapies such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychology, behaviour supports and nursing supports could be delivered on-site, as required, to individual or groups of students. Students don't have to miss school time to attend appointments. Specialist training can be delivered to teachers and other staff in special settings and they have the opportunity to gain experience and upskill while working with students with the most complex and severe difficulties.

Many of those consulted have serious concerns about the current system. There is great concern that students are being placed in special settings from an early age before having the opportunity to experience a mainstream setting. While student progress is regularly reviewed, placement decisions are rarely if ever reviewed. Once placed in a special setting, children rarely move to mainstream and there is no consensus about which professional should even be responsible for making a recommendation for a change of placement, if this is indicated. Health professionals are emphatic that they don't have the time or expertise to conduct such reviews and educational professionals are very reluctant to change a decision originally made by a health professional.

There is great concern that some students are travelling long distances to special schools and classes and arriving in schools tired and overwrought, and not in a state conducive to learning. There is also concern that these students, through attending school outside their own local areas, are losing connection to their own community. This potentially reduces the opportunities they have for making friends and developing social contacts within their own areas, which in turn can greatly limit post-school opportunities for work and leisure pursuits.

All types of schools report an increased incidence of challenging behaviours among students, although the reasons for this increase are unclear. A number of special schools reported very high levels of challenging behaviour that resulted in serious injuries to staff members and less frequently to other students. These schools also reported having inadequate access to therapeutic supports and inadequate school buildings to accommodate the needs of their students.

There are considerable differences in the levels of qualification and experience across teachers in special settings ranging from newly qualified teachers to those with long experience and Masters level qualifications in special educational needs.

While views are mixed about whether it is desirable or feasible for all students to be educated together in fully inclusive classrooms, groups strongly agreed that there was absolutely no reason why a special school should be housed in a separate building or located on a separate site. All groups consulted agreed that all students should be educated together on the one school campus.

Discussion

Our policy advice will not be completed until June 2020. As such, our deliberations are ongoing.

The NCSE's vision is a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them achieve their potential. The NCSE considers that there should be very robust evidence to demonstrate why children are educated separately from their peer group and away from their communities. It is noteworthy that the UN Committee (Convention on the Rights of People with Disability) uses the emotional term 'segregation' to describe such settings. In this report, the NCSE continues to use the terminology 'special' to describe separate settings as this is the term most commonly used in Ireland.

There is much that is good about the current system. Significant expansion in the availability of additional teaching supports and investment in other resources has brought about a situation where students with special educational needs are generally supported well in schools. Many teachers have undertaken continuous professional development to equip themselves with the requisite skills to work with students with special educational needs. Many schools are very committed to including these students and have established special education teams to support their education in the school.

There are, however, problems with the current system. The NCSE is very concerned about the condition of some of the special school buildings visited and we have written to the DES expressing concerns. Some of the schools visited are accommodated in older buildings which are not purpose-built and are not suitable to accommodating students with very complex learning, behavioural, mobility and medical needs.

We don't think that students should have to travel, sometimes considerable distances, outside their local area in order to attend school and in doing so lose the connection to their local communities. We note there is a substantial increase in individual transport costs. We will continue to consider whether this substantial increase is warranted by improved outcomes for students in these settings.

We are deeply concerned that specialist educational placements appear to be only rarely, if ever reviewed, given the life-long implications of being educated in a special setting.

We question why certain local state-funded schools should be able to decide only to admit students of a certain ability, even though these schools can be resourced to accept all students. We encourage the Minister to commence, as soon as possible, Section 62 (7) (e) (iii) of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 and other relevant sections. This section prohibits schools from taking into account a student's academic ability, skills or aptitude when deciding on an application to the school.

We consider that Ireland's recent ratification of the UNCRPD is likely to be the most significant external influence exerted on the future development of policy on special schools and classes. The UNCRPD Committee's consistent interpretation of Article 24 (Education) of the convention is especially pertinent i.e. that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive. The implications of this interpretation will be further addressed in our final report.

Next Steps

The decision about whether to move towards the inclusion of all students in mainstream classes in mainstream schools requires very careful consideration. While all consultation groups agreed that in theory, as recommended by the UNCRPD, all students should be educated together, there was considerably less consensus around whether this was feasible or even desirable for all students, particularly those with the most serious medical needs or those with the most severe behavioural needs.

The NCSE is conscious of the need to reflect Ireland's commitments under the UN Convention, to take into account policy and practice in European Union (EU) and other likeminded jurisdictions, to consider the views of education stakeholders and partners and to examine the resource implications of our recommendations.

Notwithstanding Ireland's commitments under the UNCRPD, the NCSE is of the view that the best interests of children and their needs should be fundamental and first. We are determined, at the conclusion of the consultations and discussions for this policy advice paper, to draw up a set of recommendations that we believe are right for students with special educational needs and their parents and families in the Irish context.

The value proposition underpinning NCSE's approach should be that all children should be educated together, with the appropriate supports in place, unless there is a strong evidential basis to support an alternative approach. An inclusive education system that supports an inclusive society forms part of the underlying philosophy as enshrined in the EPSEN Act 2004.

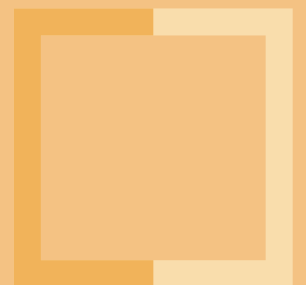
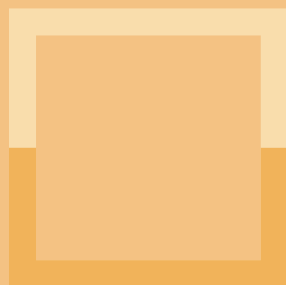
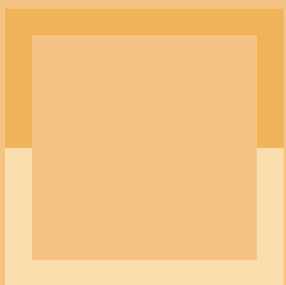
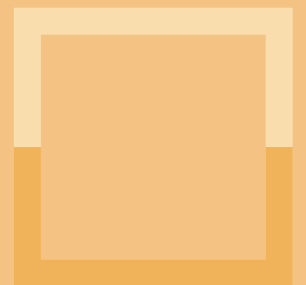
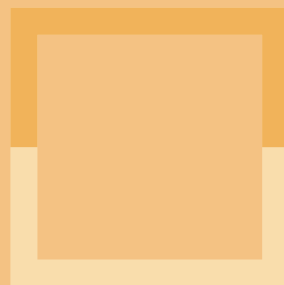
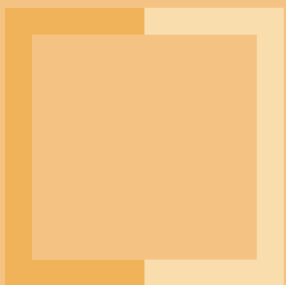
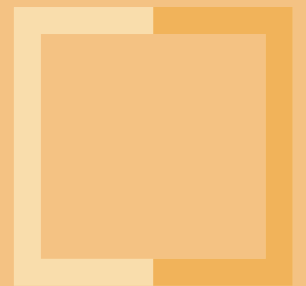
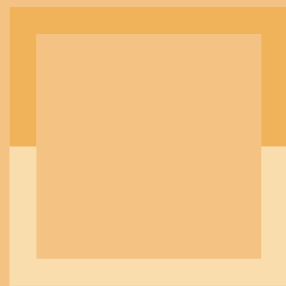
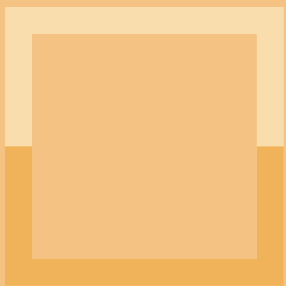
We are aware that if this policy advice recommends a move towards greater inclusion, this could potentially bring about significant changes in the education of students with the most complex needs. Such a recommendation also has the potential to engender considerable anxiety among parents and teachers who may fear that the mainstream system will be unable to cope or meet the needs of all students. The phasing of implementation will be key from a societal, cultural and economic perspective.

Parents, teachers, principals and other educational partners will need to have a clear understanding of any changes being proposed and to be consulted about those changes. Addressing initial and continuing teacher education and learning will need to be a key feature of the policy advice. Serious consideration will need to be given to the supports required by schools to include all students in mainstream classes.

Given what we have learned from research, discussions and consultations for this policy advice paper and given Ireland's commitments under the UNCRPD, the NCSE believes it is time now to engage in a wider and focussed public consultation with parents, students, people with disabilities, educators and other educational partners and stakeholders. The focus of this consultation should be on how best to move forward in the education of students currently being educated in special schools and classes.

Following this public consultation (to be immediately commenced) and further deliberations by NCSE, we will finalise the policy advice for submission to the Minister in June 2020.

Introduction



1. Introduction

In 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, T.D., requested the NCSE to advise on the educational provision that should be in place for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them achieve better outcomes.

The full terms of reference for the policy advice are set out in Appendix 1.

It was agreed that the report will be completed and submitted to the Minister by June 2020 and that the NCSE will provide a progress report to the Minister by the end of September 2019.

Previous Policy Advice – 2011

The NCSE last advised the DES on the future role of special schools and classes in February 2011⁴. At that time we emphasised NCSE's commitment to the principle enshrined in the EPSEN Act 2004 that a child with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of the child's is such that to do so would be inconsistent with:

- (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
- (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

We recommended locally based special classes in mainstream schools or special schools located on mainstream campuses as the best way forward to maximise inclusion for students where placement in a mainstream setting was deemed not to be in their best interests or to be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for other students. We note that since 2011 there has been considerable investment in special classes but to date no centralised methodology has been put in place to collect aggregated data on outcomes for students in these classes.

We advised however that further research be conducted on what needs to be in place in mainstream schools to maximise their capacity to include students with special educational needs so that the ambitions of the EPSEN Act could be realised.

In 2011 we also recommended that research be immediately undertaken to explore the efficacy of special classes as a model of provision in the Irish context. This research was subsequently commissioned by NCSE and reports from a two-phase research study conducted by the The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)⁵ were published in 2014 and 2016. Their findings show that students in special classes generally remain together across school years and spend

4 NCSE (2011) The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland, NCSE Policy Advice, February 2011.

5 McCoy, Banks, Frawley and Watson (2014). *Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland - Phase 1: Findings from a National Survey of Schools* Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI): Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.

Banks, McCoy, Frawley and Kingston (2016). *Special Classes in Irish Schools – Phase 2: A Qualitative Study*. Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI): Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.

most, if not all, of their week together. Their findings also raised questions about the reduced curriculum offered to students in special classes, and highlighted the risk that students could in some way be penalised in terms of later educational and course choice options.

Given the findings in these reports around the lack of movement out of special classes, the reduced curriculum offered and the potential long-term disadvantage associated with the placement, the authors concluded that it was time to debate what special classes aim to achieve and whether a mainstream placement is the goal for students placed in these classes⁶.

From 2011 to 2019...

Much has changed in the educational landscape since the publication of NCSE's previous policy advice on special schools and classes in 2011. Over this time, the overall student population in schools increased by 7.5 per cent (from 865,750 in September 2011 to 930,670 in July 2019). During the same time period, changes for students with special educational needs included:

- **Increased provision for students with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools:**
 - Government expenditure on special education has increased by 46 per cent (from c. €1.3bn in 2011 to an anticipated spend of c. €1.9bn in 2019).
 - Expenditure on special education as a proportion of the total education budget has increased from 15.7 per cent in 2011 to 17.6 per cent in 2019⁷.
 - The overall number of additional teachers posts available to support students with special educational needs in mainstream and special classes and special schools has increased by 46 per cent⁸ (from c. 11, 270 additional teaching posts in 2011 to c. 16,460 posts in 2019).
 - The number of SNA posts available to support students with additional care needs in mainstream and special schools has increased by 51 per cent from 10,575 in 2011 to approximately 15,950 posts in 2019.
 - The numbers of special classes has grown by 194 per cent (from c. 550 in 2011 to c. 1,620 in 2019-2020).

6 Banks, McCoy, Frawley and Kingston (2016). *Special Classes in Irish Schools – Phase 2: A Qualitative Study*. Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI): Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.

7 The 2019 gross expenditure allocation for the Department of Education and Skills will be €10.763 billion while the gross expenditure allocation in 2011 was 8,279bn.

8 The total number of Special Educational Teachers (SETs) in mainstream schools has increased by 37 per cent since 2011, from 9,740 learning support and resource teachers in 2011, to c. 13,400 in 2019. The total number of teachers in special schools has increased by 19 per cent, from c. 1025 teachers in 2011 to c. 1224 in 2019. The number of teachers in special classes has increased by 229 per cent from 505 in 2011 to c. 1840 in 2019.

- The number of students educated in special classes has increased by 155 per cent (from c. 3,300 students in 2011 to c. 8,400 in 2019)⁹.
- The number of special schools for students with disabilities has increased by 13 per cent (from 105 in 2011 to 119 in 2019)¹⁰.
- The number of students educated in special schools has increased by 15 per cent (from c. 6,850 students in 2011 to c. 7,930 in 2019).

The above information is summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Increased provision for students with special educational needs 2011-2019¹¹

	2011	2019	% increase
Total Student Population	865,760	930,670	7.5%
Expenditure on Special Education	€1.3bn	€1.9bn	46%
Special Education as percentage of education budget¹¹	15.7%	17.7%	12.7%
Additional teaching posts for special education	11,270	c.16,460	46%
SNA posts	10,575	15,950	51%
Special classes	550	1,620	194%
No. of students educated in special classes	3,300	8,400	155%
No of special schools for students with disabilities	105	119	13%
No. of students educated in special schools	6,850	7,930	15%

- **Substantive improvements in the wider system of supports for students with special educational needs**
 - In 2017, following advice received from NCSE, the DES improved how additional special education teachers (SETs) are allocated to mainstream schools. SETs are now allocated in line with the school's educational profile rather than in response to individual applications based on the diagnosis of disability. The DES also provided comprehensive guidelines to mainstream schools on how to identify and meet student needs under the new system of allocation.

9 In primary schools the number of students educated in special classes has grown from c. 2,780 to 6300. In post primary the number of students has increased from c. 520 to 2100.

10 In 2011 there were 105 special schools for students with disabilities and the DES had just granted recognition to 13 ABA centres as special schools for students with autism (previously part of the ABA pilot scheme funded by the DES).

11 The 2019 gross expenditure allocation for the Department of Education and Skills will be €10.763 billion while the gross expenditure allocation in 2011 was 8,279bn.

- In July 2018, the Ministers for Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs and Health announced the first ever demonstration project to bring specialised therapies (speech and language therapy and occupational therapy) into 150 preschools and schools. The evaluation of this project will shortly be published.
- In October 2018, the Minister for Education and Skills commenced key provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018. One of these provisions provided the Minister with the power, from December 2018, to compel a school to open a special class, after a number of steps have been concluded.
- In March 2019, the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, T.D, announced that a new model of support for schools (School Inclusion Model (SIM)), supported by €4.75 million allocated in Budget 2019, was to be trialled. This model of support aims to build schools' capacity to include students with additional education and care needs and to provide other supports for students. The model includes the trialling of:
 - A new frontloading allocation model for SNAs based on student need which breaks the link with the need for an assessment.
 - Expanded National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to provide more intensive and wide-ranging support for students with complex educational needs.
 - A new National Training Programme offered to SNAs to equip them with the skills and knowledge to support students with additional care needs.
 - A new national nursing service for children with complex medical needs in schools.
 - A new NCSE Regional Support Team structure to build school capacity to support students with special educational needs, to include four speech and language therapists, two occupational therapists and four behaviour support practitioners.
 - A further 19 speech and language therapists and 12 occupational therapists will continue to deliver supports within schools as part of the in-school demonstration project.
 - Consultation with schools, teachers and parents.
- The NCCA has introduced learning programmes at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications for students in mainstream and special schools. These programmes are designed for a very particular group of students with general learning disabilities who hitherto were unable to have their learning accredited on this framework.

International Developments

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a human rights treaty, was adopted by the United Nations in 2006, signed by the Irish Government 2007 and ratified in March 2018. Ratification is a concrete action taken by States which signals the intention to undertake legal rights and obligations contained in the Convention or the Optional Protocol.

Article 24 (2) obliges States, inter alia, to ensure that:

- People with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.
- Children with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.
- Children receive the support required, within the general education system to facilitate their effective education.
- States are required to achieve progressively the full realisation of people's rights under the CRPD. This means that States have a specific and continuing obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full realisation of Article 24¹². The UN Committee has been clear in stating that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive. However, the UN Committee acknowledges that significant change takes time to implement and accepts the concept of progressive realisation which permits countries to signal their policy intent and how the system will change over a period of time.

The UNCRPD Committee issued a General Comment No.4 (2016) on the Right to Inclusive Education, which highlighted the importance of recognising the differences between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion.

The UNCRPD Committee Defined Exclusion, Segregation, Integration and Inclusion

Exclusion occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form.

Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular impairment or to various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities.

12 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/GC/RighttoEducation/CRPD-C-GC-4.doc>

Integration occurs when people with disabilities are placed in existing mainstream educational institutions with the understanding that they can adjust to the standardised requirements of such institutions.

Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organisation, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion.

It is important to note that terms such as 'inclusion', 'inclusive education', and 'segregation' mean different things and are used differently, in different contexts, cultures and settings.

Reports from the UNCRPD Committee are clear that this Committee interprets inclusive education as educating all children together in mainstream classes within their local school. For example, a recent UN Committee report on an inquiry (under the Optional Protocol) concerning Spain recommends legislative reform in relation to the Convention in order to, inter alia:

- a. Clearly define inclusion and its specific objectives at each educational level;
- b. Envisage inclusive education as a right, not just a principle, and grant all students with disabilities, regardless of their personal characteristics, the right to access inclusive learning opportunities in the mainstream education system, with access to support services as required;
- c. Eliminate the exception for segregated education in legislation on education, including the associated psychological/educational assessment and schooling decision;
- d. Include a non-rejection clause for students on grounds of disability, clearly indicating that the denial of reasonable accommodation constitutes discrimination;
- e. Eliminate the educational segregation of students with disabilities in special schools or units within schools.

In Ireland an inclusive education has been interpreted as providing a continuum of educational provision that encompasses mainstream classes, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. In this report, the NCSE continues to use the terminology 'special' to describe separate settings as this is the term most commonly used in Ireland.

In other jurisdictions, such as New Brunswick, an inclusive education is understood as educating all students together in a common learning environment in their local schools. This doesn't mean that all children spend all day together in the same classroom. In line with their education plan, children can be withdrawn for additional support because they have special educational needs, or require mobility training or because they are exceptionally able.

In other parts of the world inclusive education is interpreted to mean that all students, regardless of disability, are included in education.

Ireland is not alone in considering educational provision for students in special schools and classes. Many European countries are currently thinking about what future direction they should take and are examining their provision in light of their obligations and responsibilities under the UNCRPD.

All State parties have to submit regular reports to the Committee on how the rights enshrined in the Convention are being implemented. The committee examines each report and makes suggestions and general recommendations on the report. It forwards these recommendations, in the form of concluding observations to the State Party concerned. All reports are published on the UNCRPD website.

Ireland is due to submit its first report to the UN in 2020. The UN Committee considers the report and makes conclusions and recommendations. The Committee may conduct a review following this which will involve a country visit. There are reputational ramifications for countries where the steps taken towards implementation of CPRD are considered insufficient and not in keeping with the spirit of the Convention.

Ireland has not as yet ratified the Convention's Optional Protocol but has indicated its intention to ratify at the earliest opportunity following completion of Ireland's first reporting cycle. The protocol establishes an individual complaints mechanism for the Convention for individuals who consider their rights under the Convention have been violated.

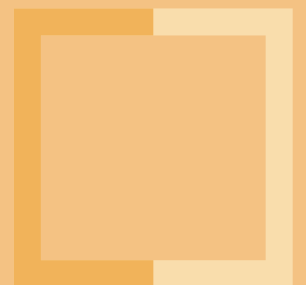
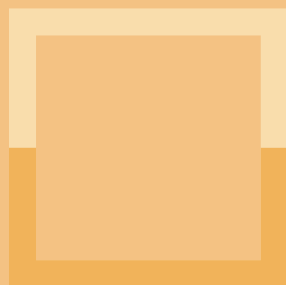
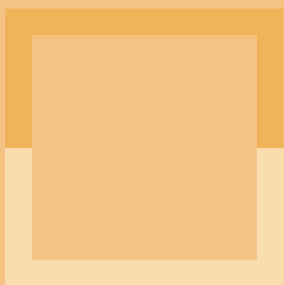
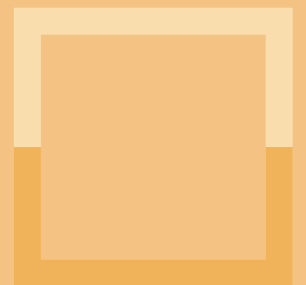
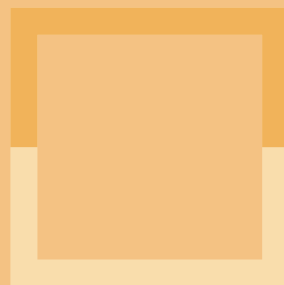
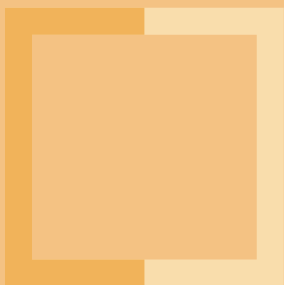
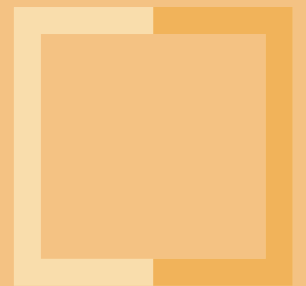
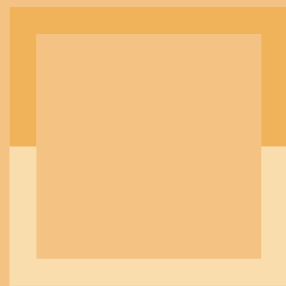
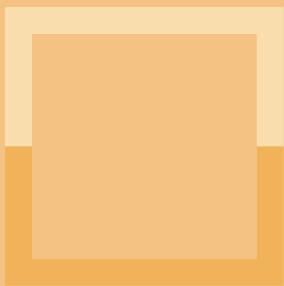
Policy Advice

Given the significant advances made, since 2011, towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and classes, it is now very timely to review whether special schools and classes should continue to be offered as part of the continuum of educational provision for students with more complex special educational needs or whether greater inclusion in mainstream classes offers a better way forward.

This progress report summarises NCSE's progress to date in preparing its advice by setting out:

- Emerging findings from a preliminary analysis of information from the consultation and research strands of the review.
- Steps towards completing the policy advice for submission to Minister.
- Timeline for completion.

NCSE's Review Process



2. NCSE's Review Process

The NCSE is very conscious to ensure that our policy advice is comprehensive and informed by robust and wide-ranging consultative and research processes.

To date we have:

Ensured that the review has a robust research base

The research element of this policy advice comprises the following strands:

1. A detailed literature review underpinned by a number of separate questions, that examined the impact of specialist provision and/or inclusion on the education of students, with and without disabilities.
2. A review of specialist provision for the education of students with special educational needs across different jurisdictions.
3. An evaluation of special classes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – conducted by the DES Inspectorate.
4. A review of a sample of DES inspection reports on special schools published in 2017 and 2018.
5. A review of professional reports recommending placement in special schools and/or special classes.
6. A survey to schools on the use of Special Education Teacher allocation to form special class-type groupings.

Section 3 describes these different research projects and outlines their current status.

Engaged in a widespread consultative process

We met with over 30 different stakeholder groups to discuss their views in relation to the policy advice being developed. Questions to be explored during consultation were circulated in advance to provide an opportunity for those invited to engage in discussion with colleagues and other associates. At the end of each consultation, participants were invited to submit a further written submission to the NCSE should they so wish.

A full list of organisations participating in consultation groups is included in Appendix 2.

NCSE council members and staff also visited 19 Irish schools (including special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary schools – with and without special classes) specifically for this review. In addition, two NCSE staff-members visited five schools in New Brunswick, Canada, to see how a completely different system supported students with special educational needs.

Council members fully discuss the policy advice at its meetings, and invite a number of expert presentations to inform these discussions. This included three invited experts from NB who presented to Council on how the change to a more inclusive education system was effected in their province.

Findings from this consultative process are set out in section 4 below.

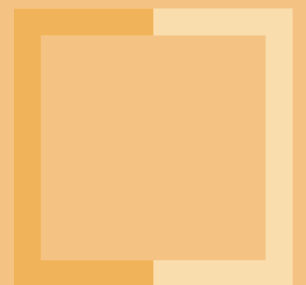
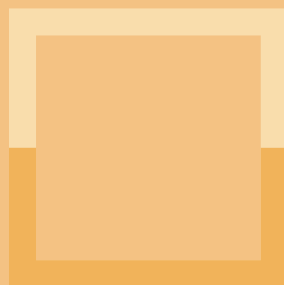
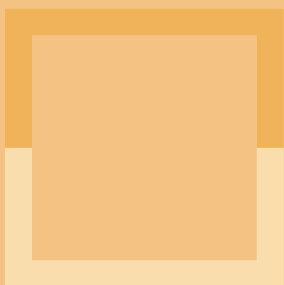
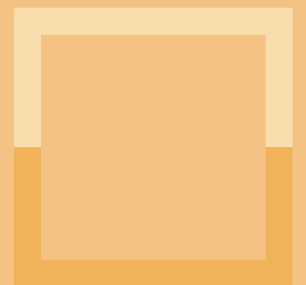
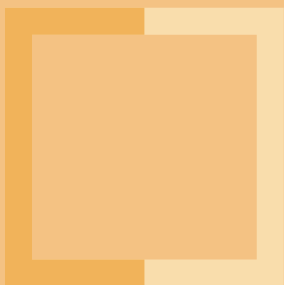
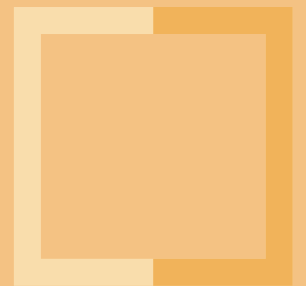
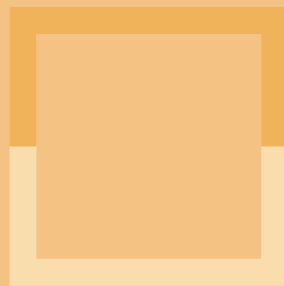
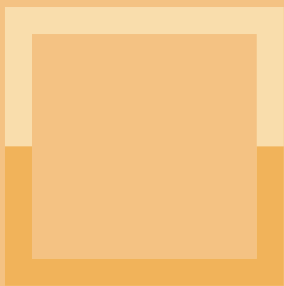
Engaged with the National Disability Authority (NDA) on Universal Design for School Buildings

The NCSE is consulting with the NDA regarding what a design for an inclusive school should look like; what changes to the current school design would be necessary to reach this standard; and what modifications to existing school buildings might be possible to make them more inclusive.

The NDA Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) is currently developing a briefing paper outlining the possible built environment implications for inclusive schools from a Universal Design perspective. Such schools would be designed to cater for all children regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

The work being carried out will inform the NCSE's final policy advice paper to the Minister.

Emerging Findings from the Research Process



3. Emerging Findings from the Research Process

The NCSE is undertaking six research projects to inform our policy advice on educational provision in special schools and classes. Much of this work is being undertaken in-house or led by the NCSE. We are also indebted to the DES Inspectorate for allowing us early access to their findings from an evaluation of special classes for students with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), undertaken during the 2018-2019 school year.

The research projects being undertaken are:

1. A review of the relevant literature from January 2000 to August 2018.
2. A review of specialist provision for educating students with special educational needs across different jurisdictions.
3. An evaluation of special class provision (conducted by DES Inspectorate).
4. A review of a sample of DES inspection reports on special schools.
5. A survey of schools on the use of special education teacher allocations.
6. A review of a sample of professional reports that recommended placement in a special class or special school.

Literature Review

We engaged in a review of the literature from January 2000 to August 2018 and with the following eight research questions.

- Q1. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) that students in specialist settings receive a good quality education?
- Q2. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) that students with special educational needs achieve better or worse outcomes in specialist settings than if they were in mainstream settings?
 - Q2A. Based on the evidence found in Q2, what factors impact on bringing about these outcomes (e.g. quality of teaching, length of placement, and other supports)?
 - Q2B. Are the outcomes achieved comparable across students with different types of disability/type of need?
- Q3. Is there evidence that some students cannot be educated in mainstream schools? If so:
 - Who are these students?
 - Why can't they be educated in mainstream settings?
 - Where should they be educated?

- Q4. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) that providing specially equipped sensory rooms in educational settings meets students' underlying sensory needs or conditions?
- Q5. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) about where special settings should be located to facilitate best educational outcomes? Does this evidence differ by type of disability?
- Q6. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) on the impact of travel time to an educational setting on the ability of a student with special educational needs to learn?
- Q7. Is there evidence (and if so, what is it) for the impact of specialist provision on outcomes for students with SSLD or SLD? If so, does this evidence suggest anything about the impact of the length of specialist provision on student outcomes?
- Q8. What is the evidence for the impact of placement in specialist settings on the school experiences of students with and without special educational needs?

This review was recently expanded in two ways and findings are currently being analysed.

- The time period for the original search process was recently updated to ensure that more recent material was identified and reviewed. The updated search extended from September 2018 to June 2019.
- An additional ninth question was recently added to the literature search. This question pertains to whether there is evidence for the impact of inclusion on the outcomes or experiences of students **without** special educational needs. This search has been undertaken using the extended time parameters (January 2000 to June 2019). This search has identified a small number of studies which meet the search criteria and which are currently being reviewed.

The remaining information in this section refers to the original timeframe and original set of eight research questions, as outlined above.

The NCSE developed stringent criteria for the inclusion of studies in our literature review as we consider that only very robust research should inform our findings and subsequent policy advice.

Our initial literature search yielded 10,971 citations which were then screened for relevance, with 348 selected for further review. Approximately 90 per cent of these were excluded for a variety of reasons, including methodology, sample size or relevance to the research question in line with generally recognised practice in conducting reviews of this nature. At the end of the screening period, 28 studies were included in the final review.

In relation to our research questions, 6 studies focussed on the provision of good quality education, 10 on student outcomes, and 12 focussed on student experiences. There were no studies that met the criteria for inclusion in relation to question 3 (students that cannot be educated in mainstream settings), question 4 (multisensory environments), question 5 (location of specialist settings within a school) or questions 6 (impact of travel time).

It should be noted that these are very specific questions which is the likely explanation why no studies were found in relation to these questions.

The above information is summarised in the table below:

Question	Studies included
Q1. Good quality education in special settings	6
Q2. Student outcomes in special settings	10
Q8. Student experiences	12
Q4. Multisensory environments	0
Q3. Students that cannot be educated in mainstream classrooms	0
Q5. Best location of special settings within school	0
Q6. Impact of Travel time	0
Q7. Impact of specialist provision for students with SSLD or SLD	0

NCSE found a general paucity of good quality research studies in relation to most of the questions posed. In fact, most of the authors included in this literature review referred to the limitations of their studies. NCSE is therefore cautious in interpreting the results from these studies, particularly at this relatively early stage of analysis of findings. Limitations identified include:

- The difficulties associated with carrying out experimental research in an educational context and the ethical limitations inherent in such research for example selecting some students for intervention and not others.
- Random control trials are limited in this area and when they do arise are typically in relation to testing a particular intervention used within a specialist setting rather than the impact of the setting itself.
- Over-reliance on self-reporting where findings are based solely on the gathered perspectives of children themselves, their parents or teachers with no triangulation of data from other sources.
- Absence of a control group which affected the strength of the researcher's ability to draw significant conclusions.
- Comparison groups not matched or similar to begin with; students with different disabilities compared.
- Low return rates of surveys.

- Findings not generalisable due to factors such as small sample size or the study being conducted in a particular geographical setting which had distinctive special education characteristics and procedures.
- Data collection and analysis that did not differentiate between students' categories of special educational needs or the levels of need (in terms of severity) amongst their participants.
- Questions arising as to the quality or reliability of background data e.g. teacher reports or data taken from archived records.
- Lack of information about: the nature of the education/intervention that participant groups received in their setting; and teacher qualifications and training in the setting.

Findings from the literature review were also limited by absence of good quality evidence for some of our questions. For example:

- No studies identified at any point during this literature search, specifically set out to provide evidence that children and young people with particular types of disabilities or special educational needs could not be educated in mainstream schools.
- Literature searches yielded no evidence that met the criteria for questions on the location of special classes within a school; or the impact of travel time on students with special educational needs ability to learn.

Review of specialist provision across different jurisdictions

We conducted a survey on different aspects of specialist provision in other jurisdictions, including what was the impact of the UNCRPD on policy and practice development in these areas.

We currently have information from eight different jurisdictions in relation to the above aspects. In advance of finalising this report we intend to make direct contact with a number of other jurisdictions to expand our response rate for this review. We also intend to conduct an analysis of the UNCRPD Committee reports which provides an additional source of information on the organisation of specialist provision across a wide range of jurisdictions.

It is important however to note that there are a number of challenges in comparing provision, schemes or programmes aimed at meeting the needs of students with special educational needs across administrations. These include the nature of the jurisdiction in question (unitary and federal), the different levels at which responsibility of education policy is held (central and/or regional and/or local) and of course the different education contexts and systems in which such provision is delivered.

Evaluation of special class provision

We collaborated with the DES Inspectorate on its evaluation of special class provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The Inspectorate is currently preparing a composite report on its evaluation which involved examining approximately 85 special classes (approximately 65 in primary and 20 in post-primary) across a number of schools (some schools having one special class, some schools have more than one).

The findings of the Inspectorate report, when available, will inform NCSE's final policy advice report.

Review of a sample of DES inspection reports on special schools

During 2017 and 2018, the Inspectorate published 17 whole school evaluation reports on special schools. As part of our evidence base, the NCSE is undertaking a secondary analysis of these reports to identify any trends or patterns in them regarding provision in special schools, as identified by the Inspectorate. This analysis will be completed in autumn 2019.

School surveys on the use of special education teacher allocation

We conducted school surveys on the use of special education teacher allocation by schools to form special class-type groupings.

The NCSE research study on special classes¹³ highlighted that some schools use their special education teacher (SET) allocation to bring together students in special class-type groupings. These students are reported to spend most of their time in these groups.

The NCSE acknowledges that the use of SETs to establish special class-type groupings, for the long-term educational placement of students, is not the intended use of the SET allocation, as set out in DES Circulars 0013 and 0014/2017.

The NCSE was interested to learn more about the extent to which this is occurring at primary school level. For this purpose, we developed a three-item survey asking school principals for the 2018/19 school year whether:

- they used their SET in the way described above
- if so, the reasons for doing it and
- The outcomes they expected students to achieve because of it.

13 McCoy, Banks, Frawley and Watson (2014). *Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland - Phase 1: Findings from a National Survey of Schools* Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI): Trim, Co Meath: NCSE.

We engaged with the Irish Primary Principals Network to administer the survey to all primary principals in May 2019 for a six week period. In total, 335 responses were received by the end of the primary school year, representing a response rate of 10.8 per cent of Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) members.

The vast majority of respondents (93.7%, n=314) indicated that they did not use their SET allocation to establish special class-type groups (identified as a group of five or more students who are being educated together for most of the school day for every day of the school week). The remainder (6.3%, n=21) indicated that they did use their SET allocation as set out above.

When this group was asked why they form such groups, 14 principals responded. Initial analysis has identified responses as falling under a number categories:

- To meet the challenges of having multi-grade classrooms (n=5)
- To provide a form of additional targeted intervention (n=4)
- To relieve pressure of the classroom teacher with large classes (n=2)
- Other singular answers (n=3 in total).

When asked how they knew that this type of intervention produced better outcomes for students in the group, 15 principals responded. Initial analysis has identified responses as falling under a number categories:

- Testing and/or class observation (n=8)
- Monitoring or continuous assessment (n=2)
- Other singular answers (n=5 in total).

It is intended to administer the survey to post-primary principals in September 2019. Our final policy advice will be informed by the findings of this survey.

Review of a sample of professional reports that recommended placement in a special class or special school

An anonymised sample of approximately 250 professional reports, covering a range of disabilities, was collected from Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) and are in the process of being analysed.

In the sample received, 54 per cent of reports recommending specialist placements came from HSE professionals and HSE funded voluntary bodies; 21.6 per cent came from private professionals; 17.4 per cent come from the National Psychological Service (NEPS); with the remainder coming from a variety of sources including the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

The professional assessments, which underpin these reports, are undertaken for multiple reasons. They may be undertaken to provide: a diagnosis of disability; an assessment of students' strengths and needs; data to guide clinical programmes; guidance for parents; advice on teaching and learning programmes; and/or recommendations on educational placement.

Analysis of this sample of reports is at a preliminary stage but its findings will inform the final report to be submitted in June 2020.

Preliminary Findings

As indicated above, a number of the research elements for this policy advice are not as yet complete. The NCSE has not, to date, completed a full analysis of the findings of those elements that are complete. In light of this and the limitations cited above any research findings need cautious interpretation at this point of our review.

We have summarised below some initial indications from our findings which, at this point, should be treated as preliminary.

There are mixed findings in the literature review regarding the impact of educational placement on student outcomes

Across the studies included in NCSE's review, the authors draw attention to the fact that at present, based on the available evidence, they could not draw definitive conclusions that one type of educational placement is better than another for children and young people with special educational needs.

For example, the authors of one study argue that outcomes can be positive for students in special educational settings or more importantly, that placement itself is less significant in determining a student's outcomes than other factors such as the nature of the education provided and the extent of effective, individualised interventions and supports provided to the student.

In contrast, seven other methodologically strong studies all suggest, based on their findings that students with special educational needs who are educated in inclusive settings have better short and long term outcomes than those who were in, what the authors described as, segregated educational placements.

One large scale US study showed students in special classes reported higher levels of victimisation, bullying perpetration and fighting than peers with special educational needs in mainstream classes. The authors conducted this large scale comparative study in 18 high schools and 14 middle schools in the United States. A total of 21,646 students were included in the sample.

Inclusive preschools can have a positive impact on a child's development compared to special preschools

Research findings suggest that inclusive preschools may have a positive impact on children's social and emotional development. Children diagnosed as developmentally delayed made significantly greater progress over time in the inclusive preschool setting than those who attended self-contained settings. The authors propose that no matter how inviting a self-contained pre-school setting might be, children may in an inclusive setting (with a similarly positive climate) have, through their pre-school experiences, better potential to develop their social/emotional skills.

Another study found that children in inclusive preschool settings on average demonstrated significantly more gains in their cognitive development, social/emotional development and adaptive behaviour scores than children in mixed disability or ASD-only preschool settings.

The authors conclude that inclusive settings may be of particular benefit for children with ASD who at the start of pre-school evidence greater social and adaptive behaviour impairments (but have at least a baseline level of communication). They argue that having the opportunity to experience regular interactions with children without disabilities could be of particular value to these children both in the short and the long term.

There is no strong evidence that providing specially equipped sensory rooms in schools meets students' underlying sensory needs or conditions

Authors of studies included in the review conclude there is a chronic lack of empirical research to support the use of controlled multisensory rooms in an educational setting to meet the sensory needs of students. While there are empirical studies about the efficacy and outcomes of multisensory interventions, in general the body of research is not robust.

Alternatively, there is no evidence that multisensory rooms are harmful.

What is clear from the research over the past two decades is that the evidence base is as yet not strong enough to conclude definitively that controlled multisensory rooms are best practice in an educational setting.

Specialist provision is still a part of education provision in eight European administrations surveyed

All eight European jurisdictions¹⁴ who participated in the NCSE survey have special schools and seven have special classes (the exception being Malta). These administrations are using specialist provision to meet students' complex needs arising from a disability. The percentage of students enrolled in specialist provision varies across these jurisdictions from 0.11%-2.08% in the case of special classes to 0.19%-3.8% in the case of special schools.

Generally, placement in special schools is based on some form of student assessment and in some cases, a formal diagnosis of disability is required. Some form of student assessment is also required in the case of placement in special classes but local decision-making is more commonly used in the case of special classes.

Only three countries (Sweden, Slovakia, and Estonia) require teachers in specialist settings to have a special education qualification/competency in addition to their initial teacher qualification. In the UK, teachers of deaf/hard of hearing students and those who are blind/visually impaired are required to have a specialist qualification.

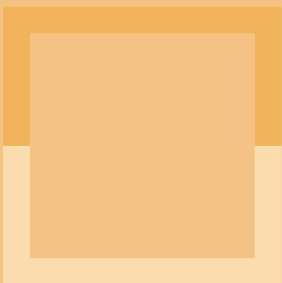
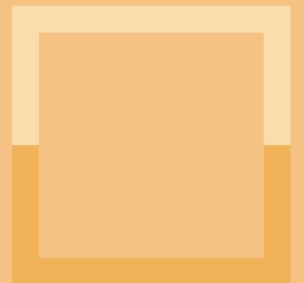
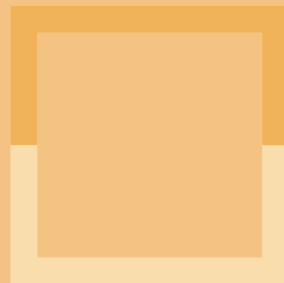
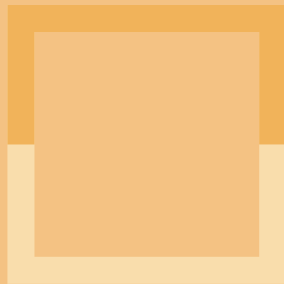
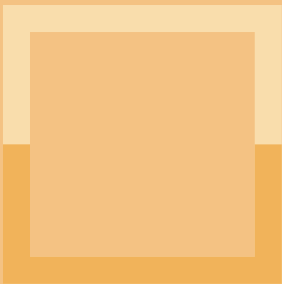
Notwithstanding UNCRPD, the intention in administrations surveyed is to maintain specialist provision, and expand it in some cases

Eight jurisdictions (that responded to the survey) were aware of the implications that the UN Committee's interpretation of the UNCRPD had for the education of students in separate specialist settings. These administrations were responding to the CPRD in different ways. For example, Malta is examining the establishment of special classes for students with ASD; Northern Ireland is considering narrowing the enrolment of students in special schools while expanding the provision of special classes; England plans to increase special school provision; Wales and Scotland have no plans to move towards dismantling their continuum of provision.

We are aware that other countries, such as Portugal and Canada, have moved in the direction of greater inclusion.

¹⁴ England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Malta, Sweden, Slovakia, Estonia.

Main Findings from our Consultation



4. Main Findings from our Consultation

Introduction

As part of developing policy advice on educational provision in special schools and classes, the NCSE engaged in a widespread consultative process with over 30 different stakeholder groups. A full list of organisations participating in consultation groups is included in Appendix 1.

Questions to be explored during consultation were circulated in advance to provide an opportunity for those invited to engage in discussion with colleagues and other associates. At the end of each consultation, participants were invited to submit a further written submission to the NCSE should they so wish.

The NCSE visited 19 schools in Ireland specifically for this review including special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary schools – with and without special classes. In addition, five schools were visited in New Brunswick Canada, to see how a completely different system supported students with special educational needs.

Council members fully discuss the policy advice at its meetings, and invite a number of expert presentations to inform these discussions. Visitors from NB were invited to speak to Council about their system of inclusive education.

What did we ask consultation groups?

While questions were tailored to particular groups, the main areas explored during discussions were:

- If in the future there were no special schools or classes, how would mainstream schools have to be reconfigured, to include children who have the most complex needs?
- What arrangements should be in place (and documented) in a school before a student is placed in a special setting?
- Should a diagnosis of disability be required for a student to join a special school/class?
- Should fixed term placement be applicable to all special classes and should there be a mandatory review of all placements at specified points in the placement?
- Schools report an increasing number of students who, because of extremely challenging behaviours, are being excluded; or on shortened school days; or require 1:1 teaching/SNA support in order to be included:
 - What are the reasons for these increases?
 - What needs to be put in place in schools for these students to be included?
 - What should happen when a placement in a special school/class breaks down?

- Does the lack of availability of therapy supports impact on the rate of enrolment in special schools and/or classes?
- Do clinicians (e.g. speech and language therapists (SLTs), clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists (OTs) have a good understanding of what happens on a daily basis in mainstream and special schools?
- What planning should be in place for the establishment of special schools/classes?

What did the consultation groups tell us?

The views and opinions set out below in this section are those expressed by group participants during the NCSE consultation process. They do not necessarily reflect the NCSE's viewpoint which is set out in sections 5&6 below.

The main points that emerged from the consultation groups are summarised below:

1. Ideally all students could, and perhaps should, be educated together with their peers in mainstream classes. However, schools, as currently configured, are not ready for this.
2. There were mixed views about whether full inclusion in mainstream classes is a desirable change.
3. The decision to place a student in a special setting is a critical one and there are a number of important steps a school should take before ever raising the option of enrolling a student into a special setting.
4. Placement in a special school or class should be based on a formal process of assessment.
5. Students' educational placements should be kept under ongoing and regular review but there is not clarity about who is responsible for making recommendations following a review.
6. Fixed term placement in special settings work for some, but not all, students with special educational needs.
7. Challenging behaviour is causing increasing difficulty in schools, particularly in special settings.
8. Lack of availability of therapy supports in mainstream schools impacts on the rate of enrolment in special schools and/or classes.
9. It should be possible to establish special classes in any school, in line with local demand, but there were mixed views on how this is best achieved.
10. Teachers require relevant professional development to meet the diversity and complexity of need present in their classroom.

1. Ideally all students could, and perhaps should, be educated together with their peers in mainstream classes. However, schools, as currently configured, are not ready for this

Consultation groups acknowledged the considerable change and improvement that has taken place in Irish education to bring us to the point where now about 98 per cent of students – with and without special educational needs – attend mainstream primary and post-primary classes. While generally these students are supported well in schools, many schools encounter challenges and structural deficits.

While the majority of those consulted considered that ideally all students could, and perhaps should, be educated together, most people found it extremely difficult to imagine how the remaining 2 per cent of students could ever be included in mainstream classes, given the level and complexity of their difficulties. In particular, they considered that specialised provision would always be required for those with the most complex medical, intellectual and behavioural difficulties.

Full inclusion in mainstream, while it could be achieved, would require considerable change to the entire current system. A fundamental change of school culture and mind-set would be required whereby teachers and parents reimagined school as a place where every child in the community is educated, irrespective of need or ability. Teachers would have to accept that it was every teacher's responsibility to teach all students. Flexible subject choices and timetables would need to be provided.

This would require strong leadership in schools in order to bring about and sustain the vision of schools for all students.

Parents of children with complex special educational needs would have to be confident that their children would be welcomed and meaningfully included in their mainstream school by teachers equipped to meet their child's needs. This would require immediate and meaningful changes to programmes of professional learning for teachers from initial teacher education, to induction to continuing professional development. Teachers would need to be skilled in applying the principles of universal design for learning so that they are prepared to teach in classrooms with the full range of ability and needs. Additional training for all school staff, including special needs assistants, ancillary staff, members of Boards of Management, bus drivers, bus escorts, would be required to create more truly inclusive schools.

Future school buildings would need to be designed according to principles of universal design for learning, and existing school buildings would need to be upgraded along similar lines. Schools would need to have appropriate facilities to include all students including those with extensive medical, physical and self-care needs. It was considered that classrooms would need to be bigger and there would need to be more storage space available to accommodate wheelchairs, standing frames, mobility aids and so on. Space would be needed for: student with complex medical needs to rest and receive nursing care when necessary; students with sensory needs to avoid sensory overload in classrooms; students with behavioural challenges to self-regulate or deescalate after an emotional outburst; adequate toileting facilities for students with personal care needs.

A whole-school commitment to inclusive education would need to be developed whereby it is clearly understood that all school staff share a responsibility for the education of all students. All teaching staff would need to share their experience and expertise to educate all students in the school. This is necessary to ensure that teachers feel supported in their classrooms and individual teachers do not feel isolated and alone.

Groups suggested that teacher : student ratios would need to be reduced if all students were to be included in mainstream classes. They felt that smaller classes would enable teachers to meet the needs of all students in the class-group including those with very significant intellectual and/or behavioural disabilities. Classroom teachers would need to work closely with special education teachers to develop and deliver individualised programmes both within the mainstream classroom and in smaller withdrawal groups. School principals and teachers would need to continue to manage the work of the SNA to ensure that the care needs of students are met in an efficient and sensitive manner.

Teachers and students would require access to ongoing and adequate therapeutic supports available consistently around the country, in a timely manner as required. A strong consensus emerged that these supports should be provided and funded by the DES and available on an in-school basis. It was considered that this was the only way that parents and teachers could be assured that these supports would be available as and when required. Similarly, adequate in-school nursing supports would be required for those students with life-limiting conditions who require such supports to attend schools.

2. There were mixed views about whether full inclusion in mainstream classes is a desirable change

There were very mixed views about the merits of this approach. The vast majority of participants felt that schools and parents were not ready for the changes necessary to bring about fully inclusive schools and that it would take many years before the necessary changes could be introduced. This was considered to be particularly the case in post-primary schools.

These participants considered that a fundamental change in school culture and teacher attitudes was required. The consultation groups considered that schools, particularly post-primary schools, would need to have greater flexibility in terms of timetabling and subject choice. Initial teacher education would need to include a greater focus on inclusive methodologies so that all teachers were better equipped to teach students with more complex needs. An adequate level of therapeutic supports would need to be available on an in-school basis.

There was, however, a significant minority viewpoint that some schools were already including all students and had been doing so for some time. Generally, these were schools in remote areas where there were no special schools or classes available or where students would have to travel inordinate distances to attend a special setting. In these areas some mainstream primary and post-primary schools had evolved to educate all students, irrespective of ability, under the current DES policies and support arrangements. Students were reported to be receiving an appropriate education in line with their abilities, and were included with their mainstream peers who accepted and supported their presence in the school.

Most participants, however, were very attached to the notion of the continuum of provision and felt there would always be a need for special schools and special classes. In their view many students enrolled in special schools because they had already experienced a lack of success in mainstream and had failed to make progress and thrive there. Participants from special schools reported that students told them they always felt different in mainstream school and that they didn't belong there. These students said they found it stressful to keep up with the pace in mainstream schools – both within and outside the classroom. Many found it difficult to integrate socially in mainstream and didn't have friends there.

When these students arrived in a special school, parents and teachers reported that, for the first time, the students felt as though they belonged. They were welcomed into the school, their achievements were celebrated and they were allowed to make progress at their own rate. Special school personnel expressed considerable concerns that students with disabilities would find themselves very isolated in mainstream schools and without real friendship.

Students generally spoke in a very positive manner about their schools, whether in mainstream or special schools or classes. Students in special schools spoke about how much they loved their school, how comfortable they felt there and what they learned there. Students in special classes similarly expressed their satisfaction with their placement, and many of these students were also included in mainstream classes. Students in mainstream classes also spoke about the support they received in schools and the progress they were making there.

Special school personnel expressed concern that teachers in mainstream schools were not equipped with the skills and/or experience necessary to meet the needs of students with very complex learning, behavioural, medical and care needs. They cited numerous examples of where they had been told that teachers in mainstream schools didn't want to teach in special classes, lacked confidence in their ability to teach these students and felt threatened by the possibility of challenging behaviours. On the other hand, they considered that teachers in special schools were committed to the education of students with complex special educational needs and had developed particular expertise in meeting their needs.

Other participants (including some parents, some teachers, and some school management bodies) argued that, while it would take time and detailed planning, it was both possible and desirable to educate all students together in mainstream classes and that this would be a very worthwhile development that would benefit all students. These participants felt that students with disabilities had the right to be educated alongside their peers and to attend their local schools. They considered that equally students without disabilities benefited because people with disabilities are part of society and being educated together helps to create knowledge and understanding of difference, which in turn leads towards the creation of a more inclusive society.

Consultation groups clearly articulated that all is not perfect in special schools and classes as they stand. Special schools and classes often don't have access to sufficient therapeutic supports. Students can have to travel long distances to school and are sometimes extremely tired and overwrought when they arrived in school. They travel out of their local communities to school which limits their opportunities to take part in activities within their own communities. Many

special schools are accommodated in very old buildings which are not purpose-built and are not fit for purpose as a modern educational institution dedicated to meeting the complex learning and care needs of students enrolled.

There were mixed views on whether it is desirable or feasible for all students to be educated together in fully inclusive classrooms. However, groups strongly agreed that there was absolutely no reason why a special school should be housed in a separate building or located on a separate site. A broadly shared view was that all students should be educated together on the one school campus.

3. The decision to place a student in a special setting is a critical one and there are a number of important steps a school should take before ever raising the option of enrolling a student into a special setting

The EPSEN Act (2004) states that a child with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of the child's is such that to do so would be inconsistent with:

- (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
- (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

Over 16,000 students are educated in either a special class or special school. Their placement is based on a professional report that provides a diagnosis of disability and a statement indicating that a special school or class is a suitable placement for them. Parents make the final decision on where their child will attend school.

Groups consulted agreed that the decision to place a student in a special setting is a critical one that can potentially, due to reduced curricular options, place limitations on a student's post-school study, placement or employment options. While these students have individualised education plans, there is no centrally agreed mechanism for collecting aggregated data on their outcomes.

Participants told us that schools must therefore ensure that a number of important steps are followed before this option is even considered. These steps are set out in the following paragraphs.

In the first instance a school needs to ensure that it has carefully implemented the DES Continuum of support and that the student has been offered support at all levels of continuum – classroom, school support and school support plus. The school should ensure that it has carefully documented the interventions used at each point of the continuum and the student's response to these interventions. The interventions used should be based on evidence based decision-making using data contained in the students support plan. Parents should be engaged in the decision-making and should be informed about the full implications of the decision – including probable limited curricular and post-school options. Any professionals involved with the student should also be consulted and included in the decision-making.

Particular concern was expressed by a number of groups that sometimes very young children start school in a special school or class and remain there throughout their education, without any opportunity for them to experience mainstream education or for their progress to be assessed there through the continuum of support. Some groups questioned whether any child should start school in a special setting.

If a decision is taken to place the student in a special setting, the school should carefully draw up a detailed transition plan which outlines the roles and responsibility of all involved in the transition. This should be drawn up in conjunction with the school to where the student is transferring.

A number of participants spoke positively about the possibility of dual placement but no evidence was produced as to beneficial student outcomes under these arrangements.

A number of groups emphasised the difficulties for a school where a student remains in mainstream when the placement has broken down and the school considers that it can no longer provide an appropriate placement for him/her. Principals and teachers in mainstream schools considered that in such cases, the student should now be placed in a special school. It should be noted however that special school principals pointed out that placements also break down in their schools but when this happens, there is no alternative placements for these students.

However, mainstream school personnel appeared less clear about what outcomes they expected special schools to achieve for these students and did not appear to have a detailed understanding of the resources and/or supports available to special schools. It seems that a perception persists that special schools are considerably more favourably supported in terms of school staffing and therapeutic supports than mainstream schools – even though – as special school personnel pointed out – this is generally not borne out in reality. In many cases, resources and supports in special schools are not different to those available to mainstream schools.

4. Placement in a special school or class should be based on a formal process of assessment

All groups concurred that some formal process of assessment of a student need should be required for placement in a special setting. There was less consensus around whether placement should require a diagnosis of disability. Many participants felt strongly that a student should not be placed in a special school or class without a diagnosis of disability from an appropriately qualified professional. Others argued that students, sometimes those with the greatest levels of need, don't always fit neatly into a disability category. The requirement for a diagnosis militates against such students accessing the appropriate supports.

A consensus emerged across groups that placement decisions should be based on identified student's needs, assessed through a formal process, by appropriately qualified professionals. Formal diagnosis of disability should play a part in this process, but should not be the sole determinant. The judgement of teachers and clinicians, along with the informed views of

parents and students, should be the determining factors (see also discussion below). The decision should also be informed by what is not working for the student in his/her current environment and all efforts should be made to remediate this, if possible.

5. Students' educational placements should be kept under ongoing and regular review but there is not clarity about who is responsible for making recommendations following a review

Groups strongly supported the position that a student's special educational placement should be kept under ongoing and regular review. At a minimum, this should take place formally at least once a year.

During consultations it became very clear that regular reviews of placements don't happen – in fact it was reported that they very rarely happen. A student's progress is reviewed on an annual basis and sometimes more frequently through the standard review of the student's support plan. This doesn't usually involve a review of whether the placement continues to be appropriate.

Serious concerns were raised across groups that once a student is placed in a special school or class he/she never returns again to mainstream education. As an example, one special school visited stated that, since its foundation, only two students had returned to mainstream education.

Whilst there was general acceptance that placements should be regularly reviewed there was no clarity about who is responsible for recommending a change in placement where a review indicates that the mainstream or special setting is no longer the appropriate educational setting for the student.

Health Service Executive (HSE) professionals were emphatic that they would not have the time to review students' placements on a yearly basis and that, even given the time to conduct such reviews, they didn't feel qualified to recommend a change in educational placement, as they are not educationalists. Teachers, on the other hand, were strongly of the view that they couldn't make this recommendation as they did not feel qualified to overturn a previous professional recommendation for a special setting. In the view of teachers, a change in placement would have to be recommended by the type of clinician who originally recommended the placement.

Further consideration is required about what needs to be in place to enable schools to review student placement as part of its review of the student's progress. Schools' competence and confidence to undertake this review needs to be strengthened. If following review the school forms the opinion that the placement is no longer appropriate, clear guidance needs to be in place for schools as to what are the next steps to be taken by them.

6. Fixed term placement in special settings work for some, but not all, students with special educational needs

Students with specific speech and language disorders (SSLD) and those with specific learning disabilities (SLD) may spend up to two years in special schools or special classes before returning to mainstream provision. In 2018-2019 there are:

- Three special schools for students with SLD and 13 special classes.
- 63 special classes for students with speech and language disorders in primary schools.

There was general agreement that fixed term placements work well for these students – however there was less agreement that this should be extended to all special classes. Participants argued that students with more severe and complex difficulties may require the flexibility to stay longer in a special setting but it was emphasised that student support plans in special settings should focus on a return to mainstream and that all placements should be regularly reviewed.

Over the last decades the DES has invested substantially in the allocation of additional special education teachers to support students in mainstream education. Groups were asked if, given this investment, there is still a need to have special settings for students with SSLD and/or SLD.

Most groups indicated that there may be an ongoing need for SSLD classes because early and intensive intervention is so important to enable students with speech, language and communication needs (SCLNs) to reach their academic potential given the connection between cognition and the development of language. The increased access to speech and language therapy provided in SSLD classes was considered a particularly important and meaningful intervention. Most groups considered that there may be an ongoing need for SSLD classes unless or until there is increased support for these students in mainstream from speech and language therapists. HSE speech and language therapists strongly supported the continuing need for these classes.

Given the substantial growth in special education teachers and increased provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for mainstream teachers, most consultation groups considered that there may no longer be a need for special schools and classes for students with SLD. Instead there is a need to upskill teachers in mainstream classes to support these students.

This view was not shared by principals of special schools for specific learning disabilities (SLD) who strenuously supported the ongoing need for their schools and for special classes. They pointed to the numbers of students who arrive to their schools with extremely low literacy rates and who make very good progress there when presented with appropriate and evidence informed interventions. They spoke of the damage that failure to acquire literacy skills had done to the self-esteem of students. These principals acknowledge that there is insufficient data collected in the Irish context (or internationally) to support their contention that students with SLD achieve better outcomes in special settings than similar students in mainstream given appropriate interventions. They considered that the NCSE should undertake such research before any decision is taken to discontinue special schools for SLD.

7. Challenging behaviour is causing increasing difficulty in schools, particularly in special settings

Schools report an increasing number of students who, because of extremely challenging behaviours, are being excluded; or on shortened school days; or require 1:1 teaching/SNA support in order to be included. All groups agreed that the level of challenging behaviours was increasing in schools both in terms of severity and frequency. This was a particular problem in special schools as referrals to special settings often arise from the student's challenging behaviour and the inability of mainstream schools to manage this behaviour.

However, in reality, special schools are often no more equipped than mainstream schools to manage or prevent these behaviours.

Special school principals reported teachers are experiencing considerable difficulty in managing certain challenging behaviours – some of which can be very serious to the point of staff members being assaulted. Principals pointed to the need to have the right balance of supports in place for both students and teachers following serious incidents.

A number of reasons were put forward for the increasing difficulty being experienced by schools in managing challenging behaviours. These included:

- Severity and intensity of behaviours.
- Insufficient training opportunities for teachers which resulted in school staff lacking the knowledge and ability to manage behaviours.
- Insufficient access to the additional therapeutic interventions necessary – including psychology and/or psychiatry.
- Inadequate space to create a suitable learning environment for students who require adequate space for sensory needs or to regulate behaviour or to calm down after an incident. This was particularly problematic in special schools.

As a result, schools often find that they have to access 1:1 support for a student or send a student home to calm down after an incident of challenging behaviour or place the student on a reduced timetable to enable the student to be present for even some of the school day. It can prove very difficult to get a child back into the school system when they are outside of the system particularly where no therapeutic supports are available to the school.

Some groups considered that management and staffing structures in special schools are not adequate for the level of need in these schools. They pointed to the need for greater flexibility in staffing arrangements for special schools and considered that a request for emergency SNA support should not trigger a whole school review of supports in a special school as this additional administrative burden acts as a barrier to a school seeking such necessary support.

Principals and teachers consulted told us that many special schools have no access to behaviour supports or other therapies such as speech and language or OT, so the only support currently available comes from SNAs, who may or may not have received appropriate training, and which on its own is not always the appropriate support. Other students are also impacted by disruptive behaviour and may require support.

Groups were unable to state any one specific cause for the increase in challenging behaviour but felt it reflected a societal increase in levels of challenging behaviour more generally. One particular group felt that the increase was linked to the growth in use of technology where young people are spending increasing amounts of time using technology and not interacting with parents, siblings or other peers.

Participants generally concurred that teachers and other school staff required additional training in: understanding the causes of challenging behaviour; understanding that student behaviour can change and that students can learn to self-regulate; the importance of whole school approaches to promoting positive behaviour and preventative measures; the management of challenging behaviours when they arise. Sometimes students behaviour is not understood as a form of communication and is misinterpreted resulting in an escalation of the behaviours. Placements then break down as a result. Groups also considered that schools needed access to a properly resourced in-school therapeutic service to assist them in addressing the needs of students with challenging behaviours.

8. Lack of availability of therapy supports in mainstream schools impacts on the rate of enrolment in special schools and/or classes

Parents and mainstream teachers and principals frequently share a perception that special schools and classes have more therapy supports available than mainstream schools and this is one of the chief reasons why parents consider that students will benefit from placement in special settings. However, many special schools reported that their therapy supports are currently being diluted (or cut back) in part because of the introduction of the Progressing Disabilities Services. There was, however, agreement that supports should be available to students regardless of educational settings – as set out in the policy on Progressing Disabilities.

All but one group (HSE professionals) considered that health clinicians e.g. speech and language therapists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, OTs, do not understand fully the experiences of students in schools. Groups felt that professionals who do not work directly in schools do not have a full understanding of how a school timetable works, how a classroom works, the roles of teachers and SNAs or how teachers can differentiate the curriculum to include students of different ability levels. Yet those consulted were concerned that these are the reporting professionals who are entrusted with the responsibility for making recommendations for educational placements and/or supports.

For these reasons groups considered it extremely important that therapy support is provided on an in-school basis, where teachers and therapists can work together for the benefit of students. Many groups were strongly of the view that therapy support should be funded and provided through the DES. There was a general welcome for the current in-school demonstration project which was considered to have great potential for supporting student's if/when it is introduced on a national basis.

It should be noted that HSE professionals did not share this view. They considered that they worked closely with many schools and teachers and had developed a very good understanding of the education context.

9. It should be possible to establish special classes in any school, in line with local demand, but there were mixed views on how this is best achieved

Consultation groups were asked about how the establishment of special classes should be planned to ensure consistency of access for students who require special provision. Groups strongly advised that special classes should be located across all schools so that all schools accept appropriate responsibility for educating students with special educational needs. (It was felt that the Admissions Act, while welcomed, would not on its own be sufficient to bring about all the necessary changes).

Given this fundamental principle, groups considered that the establishment of special classes should be based on identified student need in a catchment area and in conjunction with other agencies. The HSE should be aware of plans to establish special classes as their establishment is likely to impact on the demands for HSE support. Parental preference should also be taken into account.

Groups considered factors that SENOs should take into account when deciding which school in an area to select for a special class included that:

- The school is the students' local school.
- The school has adequate space to locate a special class.
- Balance across schools in relation to establishing classes.
- Balance within a school between the numbers of students with and without special educational needs enrolled.
- Teachers and SNAs are appropriately trained.
- Inspection reports indicate that the school is providing an appropriate education for its existing students and that leadership and management in the school is satisfactory.
- Travel time for prospective students.
- Willingness to open a special class and existing ethos of inclusiveness.

The NCSE explored whether this last factor implied that some schools will never be asked to open a special class if they are not willing to do so. This posed a dilemma for participants who, on the one hand, strongly believed that all schools should share responsibility to admit students with complex needs but who, on the other hand, found it extremely difficult to recommend that students should be placed in schools where they are not wanted and where there is not an inclusive ethos.

There was agreement that, on its own, the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 is not sufficient to address this problem. The question is how are such barriers ever to be overcome if parents, teachers and Boards of Management never have the opportunity to learn about

and engage with students with more complex needs and their families? The balance of views across consultation groups was in favour of all schools enrolling all students within their local catchment area who require a school place, given that all schools are similarly resourced.

Consultation groups were of the view that a school's reluctance to open a special class is sometimes based on a lack of knowledge about students with special educational needs and/or a fear that required supports won't be in place once they accept the students. Groups advised that principals need to be confident that necessary support will be provided once students are enrolled and that schools won't be left on their own to manage once challenges arise and particularly where placements completely break down.

10. Teachers require relevant professional development to meet the diversity and complexity of need present in their classroom

There was general acknowledgement that students with special educational needs are well cared for in schools and that some students make good progress in special schools and classes.

All groups emphasised the importance of having experienced teachers who have the relevant training to meet the diversity of need in classrooms. This applies to teachers in both mainstream and special settings and has implications for initial and continuing professional development

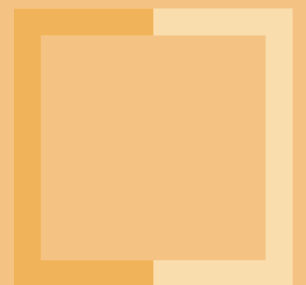
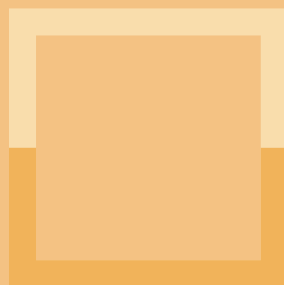
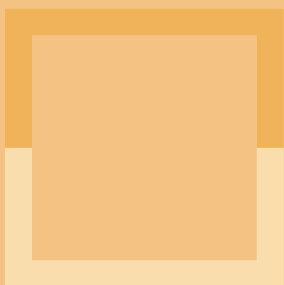
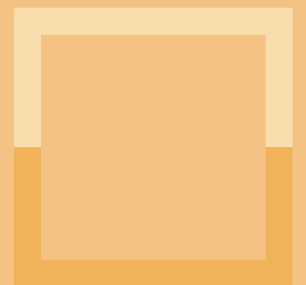
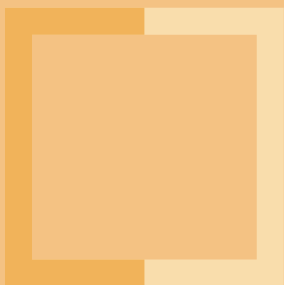
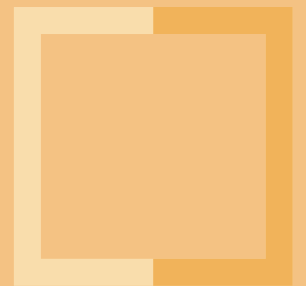
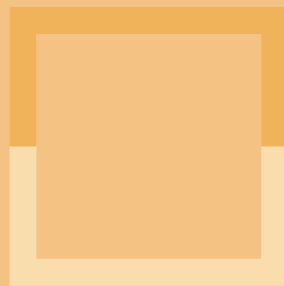
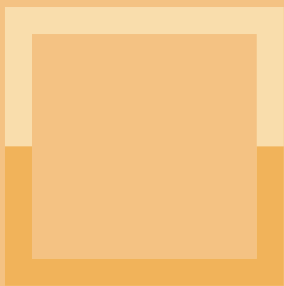
Serious concern was expressed about the extent to which young, newly qualified teachers are being placed in special classes with students who, because of their very complex needs, required the most experienced and trained teachers.

The Teaching Council advised that in line with Droichead, the integrated professional induction framework, NQTs should only be placed in special education settings in exceptional circumstances. The Teaching Council did point out that, as part of the recently re-conceptualised ITE programmes, newly qualified teachers now have access to formal professional learning in this area that more experienced colleagues may not have. They also have additional opportunities for collaborative professional support, guidance and mentoring through Droichead. The Teaching Council stated that this could mean that the NQT is actually the most qualified person in the staffroom to be placed in a specialist setting.

The Teaching Council understands, from NCSE research, that 1 in 4 students learn differently in our schools. This means that practically every classroom in the country will have students with a profile of need to be addressed. Hence, in the Teaching Council's view, the issue is less the level of advanced or additional qualification or experience that may be helpful in a given special setting or context; rather the Teaching Council, NCSE, DES and others need to focus on how best to align the provision of all professional learning supports for teachers with identifying and responding to the learning needs of children and young people on an ongoing basis. In this way we can collectively ensure that all learners receive an education appropriate to need.

The NCSE has also recently published a research report on initial teacher education and the findings of this report will inform the NCSE's final policy advice paper to the Minister.

Main Themes Emerging from NCSE School Visits



5. Main Themes Emerging from NCSE School Visits

5.1 Visits to Irish Schools

Four groups of NCSE Council members visited a range of schools (13 in total), in May 2019, to inform our policy advice on educational provision in special schools and classes. Schools visited included:

- Rural and urban settings
- Special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary schools – with and without special classes
- Special schools designated for students with: physical and multiple disabilities, mild general learning disability (GLD), moderate GLD
- Special classes for mild GLD, speech and language.

School visits generally comprised a meeting with the principal, teachers and students and a visit to classrooms. Council members were invited to visit a range of classrooms which provided them with the opportunity to observe students engaged in many different learning activities including cookery lessons, a live music session, art, and woodwork along with literacy and numeracy activities.

It should be noted that 7/13 schools visited were special schools which accounts for a greater level of observations centred on these settings. Of the remaining, three primary schools and three post-primary schools were visited.

Main Points Noted During Visits

Council members reported that students with special educational needs appeared to be supported well in all schools visited and a number of groups commented on how happy and content students appeared in their special settings.

Students expressed great pride in their work and their achievements and spoke most enthusiastically about their experience in school.

The majority of special schools reported that they have moved to enrol students in their catchment areas with additional complex or multiple needs even though the school's original designation may specify only one particular disability.

The main reasons cited by special schools for why students attended were that mainstream schools are not able to cope with the level of student's medical and/or care needs; or students have already attended mainstream school and didn't progress there or felt very isolated.

There was considerable difference in the levels of qualification and experience across teachers in special settings ranging from newly qualified teachers to those with long experience and Masters level qualifications in special educational needs.

One group in particular noted the importance of good leadership where principals are committed to inclusion.

In most cases, special school staff expressed a strongly-held commitment to maintaining specialist provision as part of a continuum of provision. Many of the special schools visited have a long history and hold a special place in their communities.

On the other hand, many of the mainstream schools visited emphasised that they saw their school as being the local school for the local population, and that all children belonged there, regardless of ability or special educational needs. Diversity appeared to be the new norm in a number of the mainstream schools visited. As an example, in one rural primary school, forty percent of the school's population had significant English language needs.

Across all school type principals and teachers reported their main challenges to be, as follows:

- All types of schools reported they had insufficient access to health supports such as speech and language, occupational therapy and mental health supports. Several special schools explained that their service had been diluted or cut back in recent times as Progressing Disability Service Teams were reconfigured in areas.
- An increased incidence of seriously challenging behaviours, particularly in some special schools and a lack of teacher training and appropriate therapy to deal with these behaviours.
- Supporting students' well-being, mindful that there tends to be a higher level of mental health difficulties among students of post-primary age and within certain disability categories e.g. Deaf/Hard of Hearing (HH) students or students with ASD.
- Inadequate space to accommodate specialist provision. Special schools were particularly concerned about the inadequacy of certain buildings which in some cases were unfit for purpose with insufficient suitable space to accommodate the complex needs of students (sensory, physical and behavioural) and insufficient storage for equipment associated with their physical needs (wheel-chairs, hoists, beds, mobility aids and so on).

Across special schools, principals and teachers reported their main challenges to be:

- Insufficient funding for special schools as enhanced capitation grant is based on student numbers which are low in special schools. Principals cited examples of fund-raising for essential equipment such as ceiling hoists, for sensory rooms and activities such as music therapy and play therapy which greatly enhance the educational experience of their students with complex intellectual and sensory needs.
- Increasing costs of insurance.

- Increased demand for admission to special school resulting in some schools having long waiting lists.
- Lack of places in post-primary special classes for students transferring from primary ASD special classes.
- Students arriving very tired and overwrought to school because they have travelled very long distances from their home. Equally they are exhausted when they arrive home in the evening time after travelling home from school. This frustration and tiredness can lead to students acting out in both home and school.
- Very high levels of challenging behaviour in special schools resulting in serious injuries to staff members and less frequently to other students.
- Achieving a balance between students' very complex medical and care needs and establishing and meeting their learning and curricular objectives.
- Principals reported that there is insufficient SNA support and that the ratio of SNAs to students should be increased. Still a perception in some schools that they have to 'fight' for supports.
- Managing the curriculum in special classes and special schools where there is a wide range of student age and ability.
- Supporting staff members who do not have full competence in use of Irish Sign Language (ISL). The principal pointed to the need for communication support workers who would interpret for students and teachers.

Across post-primary schools, principals and teachers reported their main challenges to be:

- Lack of supports for students with mental health difficulties and lack of access to counselling services – psychotherapist, psychologist.
- Providing sufficient timetabling flexibility to accommodate students with more complex needs and/or to enable a post-primary school to deal with a crisis, should this arise.
- Including students transferring from primary ASD special classes, with a recommendation for a placement in a special class, but who have other co-occurring disabilities as well.

Across primary schools, principals and teachers reported their main challenges to be:

- Supporting students with more complex needs – schools cited a number of cases where despite a high level of support being provided, the school was unable to include the student.
- Lack of sufficient SNA support, and concerns about their SNA allocation being reduced in the future.

5.2 NCSE Visit to Schools in New Brunswick (NB), Canada

A number of years ago NB took the decision to actively plan to close all special schools and special classes. The original impetus for this change came from parents who wanted their children educated alongside their peers in mainstream settings. These parents were influenced by the US Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s which through legislation ended public facilities being segregated by race and achieved important breakthroughs in equal-rights legislation for African Americans. These changes resonated with parents who saw their children as being segregated on the grounds of their disability.

The NB decision was also motivated by research findings showing that students in special education settings were less likely to progress to mainstream post-school settings than their peers with similar needs who attended mainstream school settings. There are now no special schools or special classes in NB – all students are educated with their peers in mainstream classes, including those with the most profound disabilities. It has taken over thirty years for the NB education system to evolve to a fully inclusive education system.

Given NCSE's engagement in developing policy advice on special schools and classes it was decided to undertake a study visit to examine the system of inclusive education in NB. The meeting was planned and organised by Mr. Jody Carr, former Minister for Education in NB.

Schedule of study visit

The NCSE visited five different schools during its time in NB. This included one high school, two middle schools and two elementary schools. Each school visit followed the same format. The delegation was welcomed by the school principal who led the school visit and the discussions. This was followed by a tour of the school which included visiting classrooms and speaking with students and staff.

In addition, meetings were held with a family advocacy group, district officials, Department of Education officials and a retired school administrator.

Overall observations from the study visit

Inclusion

All students in NB attend their local neighbourhood school within a defined catchment area. There are no special schools or classes even for students with the most profound level of special educational needs. It is extremely difficult to receive permission to attend a school outside your local catchment area.

The term 'inclusion' is used to refer to all students – newcomers, socially disadvantaged, First Nation, those with a disability or additional learning need and those with exceptional ability. Full inclusion is seen as a fundamental human right principle underpinning the education system. Inclusion is seen as both possible and realistic.

Students are taught together in the common learning environment. The underlying assumption is that all students belong in the mainstream...as one person put it 'you have to fight to get out not fight to get in...'. All students may be withdrawn at certain times (for example, for additional literacy/numeracy, personal care, mobility, medical needs, anxiety, self-regulation, advanced learning) but this must be governed by a Pupil Learning Plan (PLP) which must specify a plan for re-integration.

Teaching and learning in schools

Full inclusion has brought about a transformation in how schools and education are conceived in NB. This is most evident in how teachers have moved from being directors of learning to facilitators of learning. Teachers plan the work for the class very carefully but the focus is on developing student independence and using students' interests to engage them in learning. This focus applies to both students with and without special educational needs as the curriculum is child centred rather than subject based.

Classrooms are organised in a very flexible manner. Generally, students work in groups but students can move about freely in the classroom. There are flexible seating arrangements with a variety of seating options including small tents, exercise bikes, cushions, even on the floor.

Very good educational use of assistive technology and NCSE saw evidence of this throughout the schools that were visited. Students and teachers were using technology in a confident and focussed manner. Particular examples were the use of a camera (called the robot) through which a very ill child joined the class from hospital; a MakerSpace room where students used technology for design and creative solutions to problems set; a junior infant room where young children were working independently, in small groups, to complete tasks on a white board – while the teacher provided additional assistance to another small group within the classroom.

Considerable emphasis is placed on the promotion of school-wide positive behaviour and being kind and courteous to others. Staff are trained in positive behaviour management. Students are taught self-regulation. We saw many examples of this: self-regulation spaces in classrooms, reset rooms that are beautifully decorated and tranquil spaces, zones of self-regulation, breathing exercises at school assembly and so on. Students are encouraged to use these spaces, on a voluntary basis. Certain staff members are trained in non-violent crisis management.

It appears that every space is used as a learning space in NB schools. We saw learning activities taking place on corridors – for all students and not exclusively those with special educational needs. Classrooms visited were very quiet and calm and students went about their work in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Transitions are planned with transition programmes in place across schools and onwards from school.

School staff

Leadership is seen as vital to effective inclusion. Principals are called administrators and are seen as the leaders of learning in their schools.

Teachers are highly qualified (ITE is five years, resource and guidance teachers must have a relevant Masters degree) and receive ongoing CPD from their local district in areas such as autism, behaviour, PECS and so on.

Teachers appeared very confident in their professional abilities. Many teachers told us that 'we know how to include students with disabilities. What we are less sure about is how to manage behaviour arising from trauma and social anxieties'. We met with one retired school administrator who spoke of her initial scepticism that full inclusion would work but who in time, based on her experiences, became a leading advocate within her school and then across her district.

Team work is very important. Teachers emphasised that they did not feel alone in including students – they felt supported by the school team, principal and by support from the district. Several times teachers commented that 'no teacher feels on their own in this school'.

Education assistants (EAs) play an important role in including students – their role appears similar to that of the SNA in Ireland – they do play a part in supporting students' broader education but strictly under the direction of the teacher.

Support

Support is provided through a tiered model. The first tier is through the classroom teacher who is expected to problem solve as issues arise in the classroom, either through his/her own efforts and/or through discussion with more experienced colleagues. Where this does not resolve the difficulty the matter can be escalated to the school education support team (principal, resource teacher, guidance/behaviour teacher), then the district education support team (speech and language, OT, behaviour, autism). There is also an integrated services teams (funded by Education with personnel from Health, Education and Social Development). There are regular meetings between the district and school teams and schools acknowledged the support received from the District.

Additional supports (teachers and EAs) are allocated to schools on the basis of enrolment rather than need. This does cause difficulties for some schools but all students are accepted anyway.

It is notable that Speech and Language therapists are part of the education system. They moved some years ago from health to education to become part of district teams. This was universally regarded as a positive move with this support now being available to teachers and students in school.

Parents

Parents play an important role in their children's education. Their expertise is highly regarded and drawn upon by the school.

It is considered important to have people who can navigate the system for families and students. In NB this role is played by advocates employed by the New Brunswick Association for Community Living (NBACL). Skills required for this role include empathy, the ability to mediate and to instil confidence in parents that they are working for their child and will 'call it' if the system is not working properly.

School buildings

Some of the school buildings were very old – over 100 years in one case. Adaptations, sometimes rudimentary, had been made for students with physical disabilities. While the buildings were old in some cases, the classrooms were very spacious with high ceilings and wide corridors.

The Department is now focussed on imparting the principles of universal design for learning to all new and improved school buildings.

Conclusion

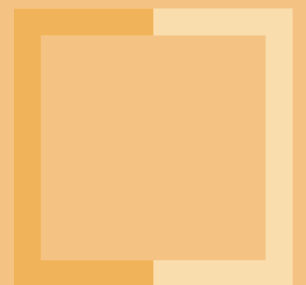
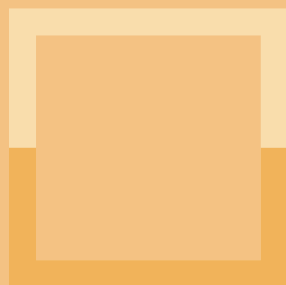
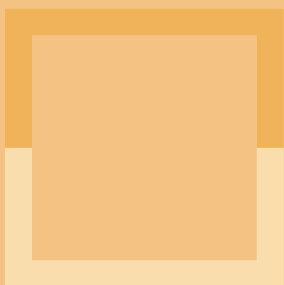
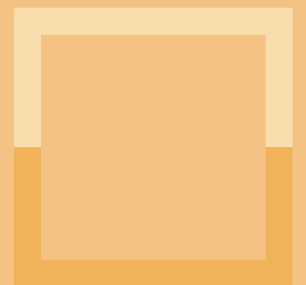
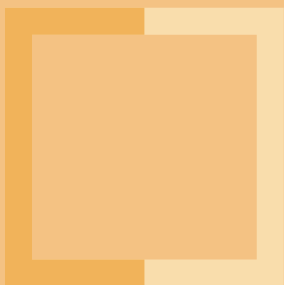
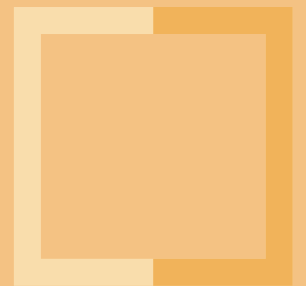
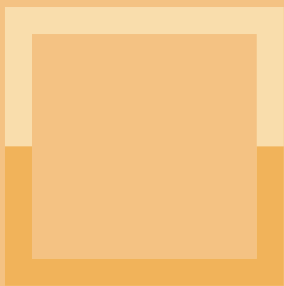
Overall NCSE was impressed at how inclusion is operating in schools in NB. Teachers appear to be committed to their work and did not appear overwhelmed by the work involved. They took pride in their ability to include all students and were pro-active in trying to anticipate, prevent and resolve any issues.

It was also interesting that teachers were confused when the perspective of parents of typically developing students was raised as a potential issue (did other parents object to students with very complex disabilities being in their child's classrooms?). The answer was "no" and great surprise was expressed at this being a possibility.

It is, of course, not a perfect system. Schools still call for more funding from their districts, educational psychologists are very scarce so there are gaps on some teams. Small numbers of parents still want special classes for their children. School placements do break down but responsibility remains with the school and educational support services to find a suitable solution. But despite these difficulties, there is a determination among parents and schools to make inclusion work.

At the end of every visit we asked those present if they would go back to the former system of mainstream and special education. Without exception they responded they would not. Comments included: 'that is a terrifying prospect'...'it's a human rights issue'...'I would change career rather than go back'.

Discussion



6. Discussion

6.1 Historical Influences

The provision of services in separate institutions, on the basis of difference, has a long history in Ireland (and indeed in many other countries). These services have included placing people in long-term psychiatric care; placing children in residential settings; and the provision of sheltered workshops and separate day care centres. The people placed in these settings were often those with physical and sensory disabilities, learning disabilities and mental health difficulties. It is not so long ago that children with severe/profound learning disabilities were considered ineducable.

These were different times. The provision of services in these separate settings arose historically from a generally held view in society that these institutions were places of safety for people who it was thought, for their own good, required a high or specialised level of care, or treatment or security within a separate dedicated setting with specialised services.

Voluntary organisations were established to provide these services, and some of these organisations continue to have an important role in the provision of education and care to children and adults with special educational needs. In recent decades statutory and voluntary organisations have made much progress in the provision of support services, including day care services, within the community. Frequently the process of transferring these services from large institutional complexes to the community has been resisted by family members and advocates who did not always accept that it was possible to provide the necessary services within the community, or indeed that the necessary resources and supports would be made available within community settings.

From a practical point of view, it is of course also easier – and more economic – for society to cluster services for people whose needs are more complex and therefore harder to meet.

In practically all of the above areas, there has been a move away from these institutionalised approaches alongside a dawning realisation that people need to be part of their communities and that services needed to be reconfigured and modernised in a way that enables this and embraces principles of inclusion, person-centeredness, accountability and quality.

Special schools were established by parent groups and voluntary organisations including religious orders to provide for students with disabilities and who were not receiving any other education. Some students with special educational needs were placed in residential care homes and attended associated special schools. These organisations provided valued services to students and their families at a time when the thinking was for many children to be placed into residential care and to attend special schools.

6.2 More Recent Influences

As in many other parts of the world, it is only comparatively recently that many Irish families have felt comfortable in acknowledging that their child might need additional support and this could be received in mainstream schools.

In 1993, the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) recommended that a continuum of educational provision (mainstream and special classes in mainstream schools and special schools) should be in place to meet students' needs and that it was the student's needs that should govern educational placement. The publication of this report had a profound influence on current educational policy and practice – particularly in relation to the continuum of provision. The adoption of the report's recommendations led to a substantial growth in provision for the education of students with special needs in mainstream schools.

In 1998, the Government announced an 'automatic response' to provide support for students with special educational needs in mainstream school.

Since the passing of the EPSEN Act in 2004¹⁵, the fundamental policy position is that students with special educational needs are to be educated alongside their peers in inclusive environments. This policy position aligns with the international movement towards greater inclusion as outlined in numerous international declarations and agreements.¹⁶

In recent decades there has been a considerable growth in the enrolment in mainstream schools of students with special educational needs. There has been a great expansion in the availability of resources for the education of these students in mainstream schools. Many parents now prefer their child with additional needs to attend mainstream school alongside their siblings and within his/her community and additional teacher and care supports are now provided to mainstream schools to enable this to happen.

However, despite the huge investment by the State in such additional supports, around 2 per cent of our students still attend either special schools or special classes.

15 While the EPSEN Act was passed in 2004, only certain sections of the Act have, to date, been commenced. These include Section 2 which provides for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs and sections 19-37 which placed the NCSE on a statutory footing. Sections of the Act that haven't been commenced include those which would have conferred a statutory entitlement to an educational assessment; individual education plans; and the delivery of related educational services.

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1. Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality (UNESCO, 1994).
2. Council of Europe Political Declaration: Improving the Quality of Life of People with Disabilities: Enhancing a Coherent Policy for and through Full Participation (Council of Europe, 2003).
3. Council of Europe Action Plan to Promote the Rights and Full Participation of People with Disabilities in Society: Improving the Quality of Life of People with Disabilities in Europe 2006-2015.
4. United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006).

6.3 An Important External Influence

Ireland's recent ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is likely to be the most significant external influence exerted on the future development of policy on special schools and classes. The UNCRPD Committee's consistent interpretation of Article 24 (Education) of the convention is especially pertinent i.e. that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive.

The above interpretation is clearly seen in the Committee's concluding observations on a number of states' compliance with the UNCRPD.¹⁷

For example, in 2016 following a review, the UN Committee noted that Portugal had established "model schools" for deaf, blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired students, as well as for students with autism, which, in the Committee's view, constituted a "form of segregation and discrimination". The Committee recommended that Portugal, in close consultation with organisations representing persons with disabilities, review its legislation on education to bring it into line with the Convention and take measures to provide additional resources and materials to facilitate access to and enjoyment of inclusive education of high quality for all students with disabilities. The Committee further called on Portugal to provide public schools with the resources they need to ensure the inclusion of all students with disabilities in ordinary classrooms.

In 2017 following a review of the United Kingdom (UK), the Committee expressed concern at:

- a. The persistence of a dual education system that segregates children with disabilities in special schools, including based on parental choice.
- b. The increasing number of children with disabilities in segregated education environments.
- c. The fact that the education system is not equipped to respond to the requirements for high-quality inclusive education, particularly reports of school authorities refusing to enrol a student with disabilities who is deemed to be "disruptive to other classmates".
- d. The fact that the education and training of teachers in inclusion competences does not reflect the requirements of inclusive education.

As Ireland only ratified the Convention in 2018, no country report is as yet available. However, the Committee's interpretation of Article 24 raises some fundamental questions for Ireland's policies and practices on the education of students with special educational needs. Current DES policy is to provide a continuum of educational provision for students with special educational needs that comprises mainstream and special classes in mainstream schools and special schools. The view emerging from the UN Committee's published reports is that inclusive education is only to be understood in terms of full inclusion in a mainstream class in a mainstream school.

¹⁷ To date, the Committee has published concluding observations on 84 countries, all of which are available on the UN website at: <https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/>

Section 2 of the EPSEN Act provides that a child with special educational needs is to 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 inconsistent with:

'the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated'.

The Committee has, in its reports, previously referenced similar caveats as contrary to the spirit and intention of the Convention.

Given how segregation is defined by the Committee (see page 16), it appears very possible that a future country report would regard the provision of special classes and special schools as contrary to the spirit and intention of the Convention.

In order to meet the CRPD obligation, as articulated by the UN Committee, Ireland's education system would need to be fundamentally changed to remove what the Committee refers to as segregated settings, e.g. separate special schools and special classes.

The UN Committee recommends the development of a fully inclusive education system should be funded by diverting funds from special settings to mainstream. In Ireland this would be particularly challenging given the poor current state of many special school buildings.

The NCSE will further consider these implications in its final policy advice paper to the Minister.

6.4 Current Beliefs

Through our consultation process, it became very clear there are widely and strongly held beliefs held regarding the education of students with complex special educational needs. including:

1. A belief that Ireland needs a continuum of education provision that encompasses mainstream and special classes and special schools

The perceived need for this continuum of provision appears to be based to a large extent on the view that only special schools and classes can be equipped to meet the very complex needs of some of our students. Principals and teachers in special schools/classes are highly regarded and seen to be extremely committed to the welfare of their students – as a result of which students are perceived to be better minded and to achieve better outcomes.

This leads to a fear from principals, teachers and parents that students might not be as well educated or cared for in mainstream settings. Their fears are exacerbated by concerns that mainstream schools do not have the capacity to educate these students well and sometimes by what they regard as negative attitudes from mainstream schools towards the admission of students with special educational needs.

Some parents report that their decision to enrol their child in a special school or class is frequently based on what they perceive to be less than satisfactory experiences and outcomes in the mainstream school, despite the additional teaching and care resources available there. Parental decisions are also influenced by professional reports that advise placement in a special setting.

The NCSE is conscious that a combination of the above factors has contributed to an upward demand for places in special schools and special classes which is placing pressure on the current system. The NCSE is encountering greater difficulty in opening sufficient special classes to meet demand. The above factors are often cited by schools reluctant, and in some cases resistant, to open special classes. In one part of Dublin, the NCSE requested the Minister to use his powers under Section 8 of the Education (Admissions to School) Act 2018, to try to meet demand.

Other groups acknowledged that professional reports can provide advice and information to parents following assessment of their child. They can also provide information to schools to inform the child's school support plan. However, these groups expressed concern that many of the professional reports advising placement in special settings are written by people who are not part of the education system, and who often do not appear to have a full understanding of the level of support available to students in mainstream classes.

The decision to place a student in a special setting is a critical educational decision that may have a significant impact on the student's education and life opportunities after school. It is important that the professional reports underpinning such decisions contain sufficient pertinent information to inform this decision. The NCSE's analysis of its sample of professional reports will provide important data on whether this is the case.

2. A belief that students are better minded in special settings and will achieve better outcomes there

During consultations, some parents told the NCSE that they want to have their child educated in a special school or class and will often fight for such a placement. They are concerned that their child feels welcome in school, that they are happy and well cared for there. They believe that he/she will benefit from smaller classes and experienced teachers. They don't want to have to worry that their child is being bullied or ridiculed or hurt.

Many of those consulted were strongly of the view that students receive better care and more individualised attention in special settings because there are smaller number of students in classes. In addition they felt that the whole school is dedicated to, and organised about, meeting the complex needs of students enrolled. As a result the curriculum is adapted to meet their needs and over time all of these factors will combine to bring about better outcomes for students enrolled.

Others argued strongly that students in special settings, even when really well cared for, have reduced curricular access and limited access to peers who do not have special educational needs. They are also inhibited from making connections within their local communities as they travel to attend school. It was felt that these factors limit their life options when they finish school.

The NCSE acknowledges parents' reasons for choosing to have their child enrolled in a special school or special class and some parents quoted evidence from their own experience to support their decisions. Other parents were equally insistent that they wanted their child educated in the mainstream system.

However, the NCSE has not, to date, found research studies that supported the parental concerns or their belief that their children will do better in a special setting. We were unable to find any substantial evidence, nationally or internationally, that supported one type of educational placement over another for students with special educational needs. Preliminary analysis from certain robust studies would appear to suggest that students with special educational needs in mainstream schools have better post-school outcomes than those educated in self-contained special settings – although the findings from these studies, as with all international research, may not be generalisable to other jurisdictions.

The EPSEN Act, with its focus on inclusion, was introduced to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives. This then should be the goal of education for all students with special educational needs, while recognising that some students' needs may impact on their ability to be present in school and/or to participate fully in school activities even when additional accommodations have been made to support them.

3. A belief that teachers in special schools/classes are better equipped to teach students with complex needs because they have more experience and better skills than mainstream colleagues

There appears to be a generally accepted belief that teachers in special settings have received additional training and/or hold additional qualifications. This belief was shared among parents and teachers, including teachers in both mainstream and special settings.

This viewpoint was given added weight by some teachers in mainstream classes who told the NCSE that they don't think they should be teaching students with more complex needs in the first place. They say that this isn't what they were trained to do and they don't have the necessary skills or competencies. In their view these students should be educated 'somewhere else', by which generally they mean a special school or class. They considered that teachers in these special settings had the requisite training and experience while mainstream teachers don't.

It should be noted, that despite the above strongly held beliefs, there is actually no mandatory requirement for teachers in special schools and classes to have additional or specialist qualifications. While many teachers in special settings have taken continuing professional development courses leading to additional qualifications, so have many special education teachers in mainstream schools.

During our consultations some principals told the NCSE that they have no choice but to allocate special class posts to the least experienced teachers in the school as the more experienced teachers do not want to take up these positions. This is sometimes because the more experienced teachers believe that they don't have the requisite levels of knowledge, skill and experience and they don't want to take risks with their student's learning and education. In other cases, teachers don't consider that the system sufficiently supports members of the school staff who have been injured from students' challenging behaviours in these classes. In still other cases, some teachers don't believe that these students should be educated in mainstream schools in the first place. Whatever the reason, the end result is that in some of these cases, NQTs are being appointed to these positions and not on the basis that they are the most skilled or qualified teacher available.

On the other hand it should be noted that many mainstream schools have, over the years, invested considerable time, effort and funding into upskilling teachers through continuous professional development and into building special education teams in their schools. Many of these schools have developed very good practices around inclusion and report considerable success in including students who might otherwise have had to travel to special schools and classes outside their areas. Principals and teachers do this because they want to develop inclusive schools that are welcoming of all students from their local area.

4. A belief that students with more complex special needs are happier in special settings

Many parents and teachers believe that students with special educational needs are happier when they are educated together in separate settings. This is based on a belief that they won't feel so different there as they are with other students who also have disabilities.

During our school visits, the NCSE spoke with many students with special educational needs in both mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. All students reported that they were very happy in their particular setting and considered they were making good progress there. We did not meet any student who wished to be placed in a different setting although we did meet a small number of students who spoke of having difficult experiences in mainstream settings before being transferred to special settings.

5. Children in special schools/classes receive better health supports and have greater access to the therapies they require to meet their needs

A very commonly held belief among parents and some mainstream teachers is that special schools and classes have ready access to a range of therapeutic supports and post-school services, which are not available to students in mainstream schools. Indeed, parents will cite this as one of the main reasons why they choose to send their child to a special setting.

Special school principals voiced their concern that they are still being asked to take students that mainstream schools can't manage (even in special classes) but they don't necessarily have any greater resources or supports to work with these students.

Traditionally, students in certain special schools did have greater access to health supports from the Voluntary Body connected to the school. However this is no longer the case as the HSE moves towards finalising the implementation of the Progressing Disabilities policy whereby students will receive therapy support in whatever school they attend. Special schools reported that they are experiencing a dilution of their therapy supports as the objectives of the new policy take effect.

At the same time, the Government has piloted an In-school Therapy Demonstration Project which aims to deliver therapy supports (speech and language, occupational therapy and behaviour practitioners) on an in-school basis to primary, post-primary and special schools.

6.5 NCSE Concerns

The NCSE has a number of concerns that arise from our consultations and school visits and that will be further addressed in our final policy advice paper to the Minister.

We share the concern expressed by a number of consultation groups that very young children start school in a special school or class and remain there throughout their education without any opportunity to experience mainstream education or for their progress to be assessed through the DES Continuum of Support. We strongly consider that schools should carefully implement the DES continuum of support before considering the placement of any student in a special setting. We are also concerned to ensure that student's placements are reviewed on a regular basis and a change of placement is implemented, where this is indicated.

We are very concerned about the condition of some of the special school buildings visited and we have written to the DES expressing concerns. Some of the schools visited are accommodated in older buildings which are not purpose-built and are not suitable to accommodating students with very complex learning, behavioural, mobility and medical needs. In certain cases, classrooms are very small for teaching purposes and to accommodate the number of students and adults in the classroom. In other cases facilities are inadequate to manage, with sensitivity, students' personal self-care needs in a way that allowed students the necessary privacy and dignity. Storage space is frequently insufficient for wheel-chairs and other equipment associated with complex medical and physical needs.

In many instances there are no separate spaces available for students to take a sensory break or to self-regulate or to recover after a behavioural incident. We are concerned that unpredictable and extreme behaviours can be exacerbated by environments where space is limited and where there are no separate spaces for students to recover from emotional outbursts or to self-regulate to avoid an episode of challenging behaviour.

During school visits, NCSE delegations witnessed how clustering students with very serious intellectual, behavioural and emotional needs can bring an intensity to the teaching situation that has the potential to cause great stress to students, teachers and other staff. The NCSE was told that the majority of students enrolled in two particular special schools exhibit challenging

behaviours. In these two schools it was reported that teachers, SNAs and other students are constantly under threat of being attacked and staff are regularly injured.

The NCSE visited a number of mainstream schools, with an adequate level of support that had included students with extremely challenging behaviour. While these schools were undoubtedly challenged by these behaviours, they did not appear to experience the same sense of ongoing threat. This could be because these schools did not have a clustering of students with extremely high needs, and very challenging behaviours.

The NCSE is also concerned that some students, a number of whom have very complex medical and behavioural needs, are travelling long distances to special schools and classes and some are arriving to school overwrought and not ready for the school day. The NCSE notes a substantial increase in individual transport costs and will continue to consider whether this substantial increase is warranted by improved outcomes for students in these settings.

Challenges ahead

Difficulties and challenges continue in the current system and there are different viewpoints on how these should be addressed.

In consultations with the education partners, the NCSE has found that the concept of separate education settings is so deeply embedded that people found it almost impossible to imagine a system that doesn't have special schools and classes. This is despite the fact that already 98 per cent of our students are educated in mainstream classes¹⁸ and that in some of the less densely populated areas of the country all students are educated together, regardless of ability or severity of need. This is because, in these areas, special schools are not locally available and the local mainstream schools accept that all students should attend their local school and they don't want to send students with greater levels of need travelling on buses to schools some distance outside their own communities. Every year, the NCSE finds many schools that are willing to open special classes but at the same time we are experiencing considerable difficulties in getting some other schools to open special classes.

While many consultation groups expressed the belief that all children should, in theory, be educated together they were very concerned that the necessary level of support and expertise would not be forthcoming to support their education in mainstream schools. As a result they fear that students with more complex needs will be included in name only and could be worse off as a result.

Other groups expressed concern that the inclusion of all students, irrespective of complexity of need, would have a negative impact on the education of their peers without disabilities. Their concern was that the education of these students would be constantly disrupted by seriously challenging behaviours or that teachers' attention would be disproportionately focussed on

¹⁸ 98 per cent of the student population in primary and post-primary schools attend mainstream classes, 1 per cent are enrolled in special classes.

those with the greatest intellectual, physical, sensory or medical challenges. Yet the NCSE's initial analysis of the available research evidence doesn't appear, at this point, to support this fear but rather indicates that inclusion either has a positive impact or no impact on students without special educational needs.

There were other contrary views expressed. Some groups cited the EPSEN Act to support their view-point¹⁹ that it is a critical educational decision to determine that placement in an inclusive mainstream classroom is not in a particular child's best interest. These groups were concerned that educating a child in a separate specialist setting can have life-long consequences for a child and there is clear evidence that once placed there, children rarely leave this setting. These groups questioned whether there is sufficient evidence to indicate that children's outcomes are significantly improved by attending special settings even where this involves them travelling considerable distances with limited opportunity to mix with children who do not have special educational needs.

Others argue that it is more economic and practical to cluster students with more complex needs in one setting. Therapies such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychology, behaviour supports can be delivered on-site, as required, to individual or groups of students. Students don't have to miss school time to attend appointments. Nursing supports can also be centralised where a number of medically compromised students are located together in special schools or classes. Specialist training can be delivered to teachers and other staff in special settings and they have the opportunity to gain experience and upskill while working with students with the most complex and severe difficulties.

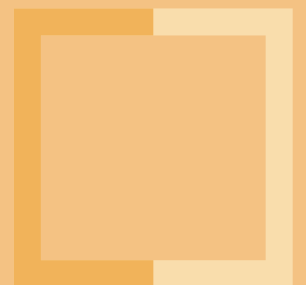
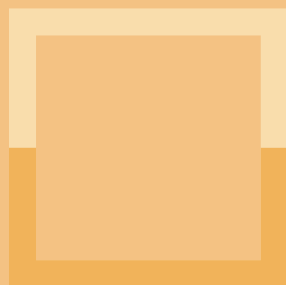
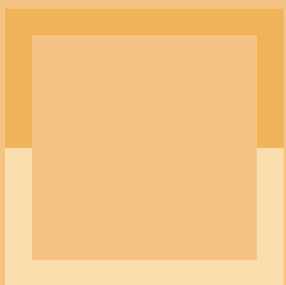
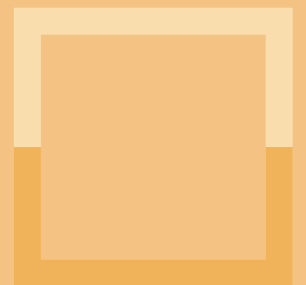
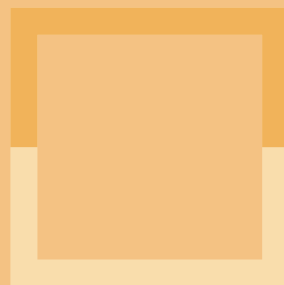
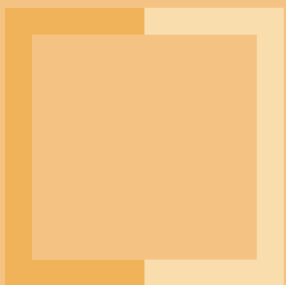
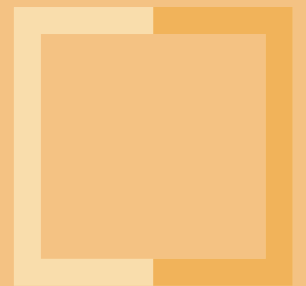
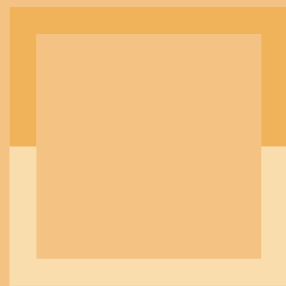
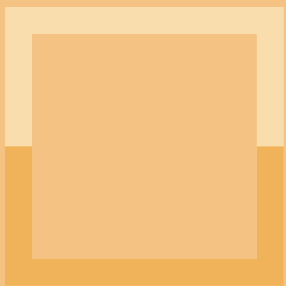
The NCSE was repeatedly told, even by those that favoured greater inclusion, that the system wasn't ready to educate all students together. The greatest change that would need to take place was attitudinal. School leaders would need time to create a culture in schools where all students were welcomed and where teachers understood that it was their job to educate all, regardless of ability or need. School culture would need to be based on the acceptance that all students rightfully belonged in their local school and this right was not dependent on the generosity or willingness of individual boards of management to enrol a student with complex special educational needs.

It was indicated to the NCSE that significant elements of current policy and practice would need fundamental reform to bring about these systemic changes – even if it is the right way to go. It would take time to plan and implement and require leadership, teacher upskilling, adequate funding, and investment in building schools' capacity to include all in a meaningful way.

Yet it should be noted that the NCSE visited schools that, under the current system, were welcoming and educating all children together, irrespective of ability or needs.

19 Government of Ireland (2004). *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2003/34/>

Conclusions and Next Steps



7. Conclusions and Next Steps

Approximately 2 per cent of students are educated in separate specialist settings in Irish schools, whether this is a special school or special class in a mainstream settings. Until this time, this continuum of provision has generally been accepted, without serious questioning, as being necessary and in the best interest of students who attend these settings. In fact representatives of special schools have, over the years, strongly put forward the argument that their schools are inclusive because the students who attend there are meaningfully engaged in school activities and have access to a full and broad curriculum.

The decision about whether to move towards the inclusion of all students in mainstream schools requires very careful consideration. In this context full inclusion does not mean every child spending all day, every day, in a mainstream class or that a child may not be supported in a small group as necessary. While almost all consultation groups agreed that in theory all students should be educated together, there was considerable less consensus around whether this was feasible or even desirable for all students, particularly those with the most serious medical needs or those with the most severe behavioural needs.

NCSE Council members have already engaged in wide ranging discussions on the parameters of this policy advice. We are conscious of the need to reflect Ireland's commitments under the UN Convention, to take into account policy and practice in EU and other likeminded jurisdictions, to consider the views of education stakeholders and partners and to examine the resource implications of our recommendations.

NCSE is determined, at the conclusion of the consultations and discussions for this policy advice paper, to draw up a set of recommendations that we believe are right for students with special educational needs and their parents and families in the Irish context.

We recognise that many improvements have already been made. Through these improvements we have learned more and are better informed to make future decisions. As a society, we can always do better and there is still a distance to go to provide what students with special educational needs and their parents deserve to experience from the educational system.

We consider that all children benefit from living in an inclusive society where together they learn to understand difference that arises from diverse groupings – whether race, ethnicity, disability, gender, religion and so on. The NCSE is aware of the argument that in order to build inclusive societies children should first be educated together rather than being separated into different schools or class groupings based on their needs or disability.

We consider there has to be robust evidence to justify why students should have to travel, sometimes considerable distances, outside their local area in order to attend school and in doing so lose the connection to their local communities.

We question why certain local state-funded schools should be able to decide only to admit students of a certain ability, even though these schools can be resourced to accept all students. We encourage the Minister to commence, as soon as possible, Section 62 (7) (e) (iii) of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 and other relevant sections. Section 62 prohibits schools from taking into account a student's academic ability, skills or aptitude when deciding on an application to the school.

We are concerned that a small number of parents are still experiencing refusals or soft barriers by certain schools to enrol their children with special educational needs, despite the school having the capacity to enrol the child and despite the fact that the school can be resourced in the same way as every other school. When these situations arise, it results in significant stress and pressure on parents who are justifiably angry that the current system facilitates some schools in resisting enrolment.

Section 67 (1) of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act (Designation of School by NCSE or Child and Family Agency), when commenced, may provide a resolution of this issue. Under this section of the Act, the NCSE may, under certain circumstances as specified in the Act, designate the school which the child is to attend and that school must admit the child upon being directed by the Council to do so.

There are many other issues to be considered, some of which include:

- Why should any young child, aged 4 or 5 be placed in a special setting when they have had no opportunity to learn with and from their peers without special educational needs...and when they may have successfully participated in an inclusive preschool experience?
- Can the most complex needs of students, i.e. medical, learning and behavioural needs, ever be met in mainstream classes with thirty other students, some of whom might also have special educational needs?
- Why should any student have to travel up to 40 miles, or spend a long time on a bus to and from school, to receive an education appropriate to their needs and why can't they receive this education in their local mainstream schools?
- Are there implications for the Irish educational system of research findings emanating from other jurisdictions that indicate that mainstream education may result in more positive post-school outcomes for students with special educational needs? Does this require a re-examination of the post-school progression pathways?
- What are the implications of the UNCRPD for the Irish system?

Notwithstanding Ireland's commitments under the UNCRPD, the NCSE is of the view that the best interests of children and their needs should be fundamental and first. The value proposition underpinning NCSE's approach should be that all children should be educated together, with the appropriate supports in place, unless there is a strong evidential basis to support an alternative approach. An inclusive education system that supports an inclusive society forms part of the underlying philosophy as enshrined in the EPSEN Act 2004.

The NCSE accepts, based on our extensive consultations to date, that parents, teachers, principals, school management and other education partners find it difficult at first to conceptualise a school system which supports all students irrespective of ability in the same school. However, following a teasing through of the issues, groups started to consider that it might be possible and meritorious to educate all children in mainstream schools but felt the process of achieving this would be challenging and take many years.

We are aware that if this policy advice recommends a move towards greater inclusion, this could potentially bring about significant changes in the education of students with the most complex needs. Such a recommendation also has the potential to engender considerable anxiety among parents and teachers who may fear that the mainstream system will be unable to cope or meet the needs of all students. The phasing of implementation will be key from a societal, cultural and economic perspective.

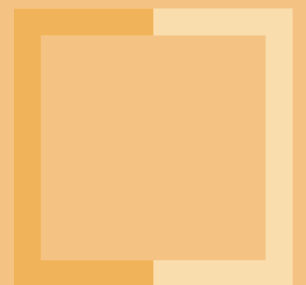
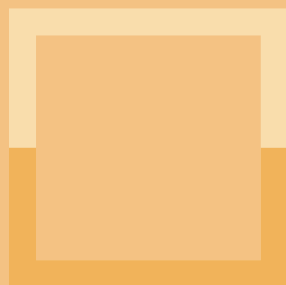
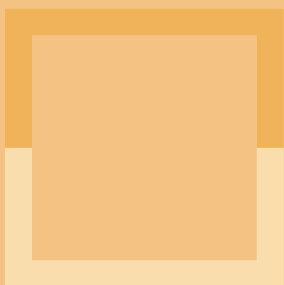
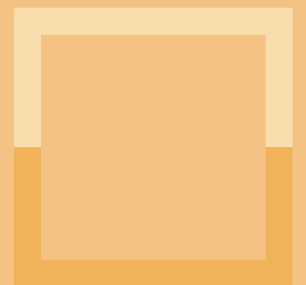
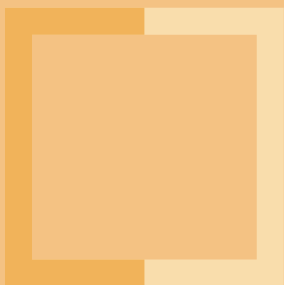
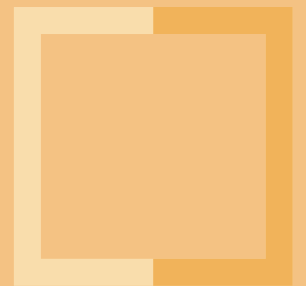
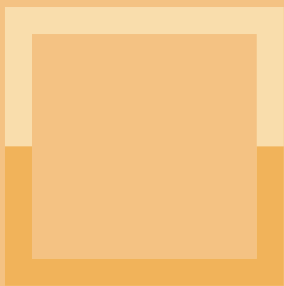
Parents, teachers, principals and other educational partners will need to have a clear understanding of any changes being proposed and to be consulted about those changes. Addressing initial and continuing teacher education and learning will need to be a key feature of the policy advice. Serious consideration will need to be given to the supports required by schools to include all students in mainstream classes.

Most consultation groups accepted that it is right that all children should be educated together but thought that many aspects of the current system would need to change to make this possible. Fundamental change would be required to school culture, attitudes, teacher professional development, school buildings and pupil-teacher ratios. This change process would require adequate resourcing and investment to ensure the correct supports are in place to support the inclusion of all students.

Given what we have learned from research, discussions and consultations for this policy advice paper and given Ireland's commitments under the UNCRPD, the NCSE believes it is time now to engage in a public consultation with parents, students, people with disabilities, educators and other educational partners and stakeholders. The focus of this consultation should be on how best to move forward in the education of students currently being educated in special schools and classes.

Following this public consultation (to be immediately commenced) and further deliberations by NCSE, we will finalise the policy advice for submission to the Minister in June 2020.

Appendices



Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

1. Examine whether there is local or international evidence that placement in specialist settings brings about improved educational outcomes and experiences, relative to their ability, for students with special educational needs. If so, what is the nature of the support provided to these students?

Examine whether this evidence is the same for students with different kinds of needs/ disabilities.

Review the current provision of specialist settings, with a particular focus on their operation in Irish primary and post-primary mainstream schools including what criteria for admissions are in place.

2. Examine what are the relevant factors that may be impacting on the significant year-on-year increase in special class provision. In particular analyse the reasons why so many students are now being recommended by professionals for placement in special classes.
3. Examine current approaches to whole school decision making in relation to the provision of the education and the welfare of students with special educational needs.
4. Review recent research findings on models for providing therapeutic supports for students with special educational needs who require them, including any emerging findings from the evaluation of the In-school Demonstration Project with reference to the impact on:
 - Teachers' practices and confidence in responding to the needs of students with significant needs.
 - Students' learning and participation.

And whether the availability of therapeutic supports plays a role in school enrolment decisions.

5. Examine, in the Irish context, evidence of whether there are any students for whom both specialist and mainstream educational settings are currently not working and consider those factors which might be contributing to this situation?
6. Consider and advise on the development and implementation of an evidence based evaluation framework together with relevant KPIs for special educational needs student supports suitable for the Irish context.
7. Examine whether the UNCRPD has any implications for the ongoing establishment of special schools and classes in Ireland.
8. Provide advice on the future role of special class and special school placements in the continuum of education provision for students with special education needs.
9. Make recommendations on the provision required to enable students in special schools and classes achieve better outcomes.

Appendix 2: List of Consultations

Date	Name of Group
1st October 2028	Session 1: School Principals Session 2: Voluntary Bodies Session 3: Teaching Union Officials
11th October	DES Sections: Session 1: Special Education Section Session 2: Teacher Education Section Session 3: Teacher Allocations
15th Oct	Session 1: School Management Bodies Session 2: Advocacy Groups
17th Oct	DES Section: Early Years
18th Oct 2018	Meeting with special school principals
23rd Oct 2018	NCSE Consultative Forum
30th Oct 2018	Session 1: SNA Union Officials (Forsa) Session 2: Teachers Session 3: Parent representatives Session 4: Advocacy groups x2
9th Nov 2018	Session 1: Meeting with Gaelscoileanna Session 2: DES Sections: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspectorate • National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
19th Nov 2018	Session 1: School Patron Bodies Session 2: Officials from Government Departments/Agencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) & Better Start • Department of Health/HSE Session 3: National Disability Authority
26th-30th Nov 2018	New Brunswick Visit
3rd Dec 2018	HSE Professionals
5th Dec 2018	NCSE Regional Managers
17th Dec 2018	Education Stakeholders
24th Jan 2018	Visit Gaelscoil Bailebrigin
28th Jan 2019	NCSE Staff (SENOs; visiting teachers; advisers)

Date	Name of Group
4th Feb 2019	Consultation with NCSE Specialist Leads
6th Feb 2019	Principals of Special Schools and Classes (approximately 100 participants)
12th Feb 2019	St Michael's House Officials
5th Mar 2019	Principals of 3 special schools for Specific Learning Disability
11th Mar 2019	IPPN
12th Mar 2019	Visit to Beara CS, Co Cork
26th Mar 2019	Students – Newtownpark Comprehensive School
29th Mar 2019	Visit to St Michael House Dublin special schools
4th April 2019	Students – Carmona Special Schools
10th April 2019	Students – St Roses Special School Tallaght
13th/14th May	Council school visits
16th May 2019	Teaching Council

Appendix 3: NCSE Consultation on Special Schools and Classes

General Questions for Discussions

1. How would mainstream schools have to be reconfigured, to include children who have the most complex needs (learning, behavioural, medical), in terms of:
 - Environment
 - Attitudes
 - Supports
 - Training
 - Curriculum
 - Other.
2. What steps should a school take (and document) before a principal raises a question about placing a student in a special class? What are the steps for placement in a special school?
3. What evidence should be required before a special placement is considered? What criteria should be in place for a student to join a special school/class (e.g. should a diagnosis of disability be required?).
4. Students with specific speech and language disorders (SSLD) and those with specific learning disabilities (SLD) may spend up to two years in special classes before returning to mainstream provision.
 - a. Should this fixed term placement be applicable to all special classes?
 - b. Should there be a mandatory review of all placements at specified points in the placement?
 - c. Is there still a need to have special classes for SSLD and/or SLD?
5. Schools report an increasing number of students who, because of extremely challenging behaviours, are being excluded; or on shortened school days; or require 1:1 teaching/SNA support in order to be included. A separate issue is the increase in the numbers of students transferring to special schools/classes at entry to post-primary education.
 - a. What are the reasons for these increases?
 - b. What needs to be put in place in schools for these students to be included?
 - c. What should happen when a placement in a special school/class breaks down?
 - d. What is the evidence for/against dual enrolment of students?

6. Therapy Supports:

- a. Does the lack of availability of therapy supports impact on the rate of enrolment in special schools and/or classes?
- b. From your experience do you consider that clinicians (e.g. speech and language therapists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, OTs) have a good understanding of what happens on a daily basis in mainstream and special schools?

7. Planning for special schools/classes:

- a. Who should be involved in planning the establishment of special classes and schools?
- b. What factors should be taken into account?
- c. What should determine whether it is a special class or school that is required?
- d. On what basis should a school be selected for the setting up of a special class?
- e. What steps are required in the planning process for a special school or special class?
- f. What arrangements must be in place before a school/class is opened?

