

*A better and more equitable way*

# Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs

A guide for parents/guardians  
and students

An NCSE Working Group Report





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**An NCSE Working Group Report**

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# A better and more equitable way







## Introduction

A National Council for Special Education (NCSE) working group has proposed a new and better way to allocate special education teachers to mainstream schools. This proposal for a new model took national and international research into account and followed a wide process of consultation with all the major educational stakeholders – parents, teachers, students, school management bodies and so on. The proposed new model recommends that there would no longer be a distinction between learning support and resource teachers who would instead be known as support teachers. Under the proposed new model, all special education support teachers would be allocated to schools in line with each school's educational need for such support.

The need for a better allocation system arose because the NCSE had found that the current way of allocating additional teaching for students with special educational needs was inequitable. The Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D., agreed that the system could be improved and asked the NCSE to set up a working group to develop a proposal for a new model.

This booklet is to help parents and guardians to understand how the proposed new model would work in schools. The full report on the proposed new model is available on the NCSE website at: [www.ncse.ie/policy\\_advice/policy.asp](http://www.ncse.ie/policy_advice/policy.asp).

## **The NCSE working group believes that the new model will bring benefits to students**

- Over 10,000 existing special educational teachers would be allocated to schools in line with their level of need for additional support.<sup>1</sup>
- Students would no longer have to wait for a professional diagnosis of disability before being provided with additional teaching support in schools.
- Students would no longer have to be labelled with a diagnosis of disability before they can be given additional teaching support.
- Parents would no longer have to pay for private consultants to diagnose their children with a disability purely to access additional teaching support.
- Schools would have greater certainty about their teacher staffing levels which would enable them to plan for appropriate further training where necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of learning support and resource teacher posts will increase to over 11,000 for the 2014/2015 school year.

## The NCSE working group believes that there are good reasons to change the current system

Current System	This is unfair because:
<p>All primary and post-primary schools receive additional Learning Support Teachers, to help students with learning difficulties, on the basis of the number of class teachers or the number of students in each school</p>	<p>The need for learning support can differ from school to school. For example, two post-primary schools may have the same number of students but all students from one could continue to 3rd level and only a few students from the other post-primary school might go – yet both schools receive the same level of additional learning support. Two primary schools may have the same number of class teachers but one could have a lot of students with learning difficulties and the other could have relatively few. But the current system provides exactly the same level of support to both schools. This is not a good or fair way to allocate additional teaching support.</p>
<p>The current system requires a formal diagnosis of disability before resource teaching support is provided.</p>	<p>Many students are currently on long waiting lists for a formal professional diagnosis of disability. While on the waiting list, resource teaching support cannot be provided to their school on their behalf – even where their need for such support is obvious. Access to additional special educational teaching support should not be postponed because of delayed access to diagnostic services.</p>

<b>Current System</b>	<b>This is unfair because:</b>
Some parents pay large sums of money for private consultants to diagnose their children.	Access to additional special education teaching support should be equitable and should not depend on a family's ability to pay for diagnostic services – indeed some parents can not afford the money they spend on these assessments. The current system can reinforce disadvantage because children from less well-off families have to wait longer for public diagnostic services and supports in school.
Every student with the same category of disability gets the same level of resource teaching support, irrespective of age or ability.	While it may seem fair at first, that schools get the same amount of teaching support for each student who is diagnosed within a particular category of disability, in fact this is not the case. Students within the same category of disability may have very different needs for support. For example, one student with a physical disability may have very significant mobility and other difficulties and need a lot of extra help at school where another student may use a wheelchair but may otherwise have very little need for resource teaching support. Yet under the present model, the same amount of teaching resources is allocated to his / her school even though the student may not require this level of support.
Health and educational professionals take significant time to diagnose a child's disability	It takes time to diagnose a child's disability accurately but many professionals have told us that they feel obliged under the current system to label children as having a disability simply to ensure that the school gets additional resource teaching hours. The time spent diagnosing a disability could be better used in providing the necessary professional treatment, intervention and therapeutic support for the child.

## The NCSE working group believes that there is a better and fairer way to allocate teachers

There are over 5,000 learning support teachers and over 5,000 resource teachers in our schools at present.<sup>2</sup> The proposed new model would allocate the vast majority of these teachers to schools on the basis of each school's educational profile. Around 1,500 of the teachers would be allocated to schools to ensure that every school has up-front resources to enable it to be an inclusive school and to put in place early intervention and prevention programmes for students who need them.

The remaining teachers – the majority – will be allocated in accordance with each school's educational profile. Relevant information would be used to calculate each school's educational profile. The information would come from three broad areas:

- the number of students with very complex special educational needs;<sup>3</sup>
- the results of standardised tests;
- the social context of each school.

Some of this information is available and other information would take time to collect. For example, the NCSE has a lot of information on the number of students with very complex special educational needs in schools. Information on children with complex special educational needs who are enrolling in infant classes in primary schools could be collected by the SENOs from the HSE.

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2 The number of resource teacher posts will increase to over 6,000 for the 2014/2015 school year.

3 In this context, the term 'students with complex special educational needs' refers to a small number of students with enduring conditions that significantly affect their ability to learn. These students require additional teaching support because they need highly individualised and differentiated learning programmes that are significantly different to those of their peers.

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Every primary student in 2nd, 4th and 6th class takes standardised tests in reading and mathematics. Standardised tests are used internationally as a basis for allocating resources as they show how one school's overall level of educational achievement differs from another school. At present, the results of these tests are sent to the Department of Education and Skills. Post-primary schools are given the standardised test results for each of their incoming first-year students. Therefore the information on standardised tests is readily available.

Other information would have to be compiled. Research clearly shows that certain special educational needs are more often found in areas of social or educational disadvantage. Relevant information in this area was last compiled in 2005 and up-to-date information would need to be collected from schools.

All of this information together would allow a clear picture to emerge of the need for additional teaching support in every school.

The proposed new model would not have any impact on the need for a diagnosis of disability for other Departmental schemes such as the Special Needs Assistant scheme or the Reasonable Accommodation for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations (RACE) schemes.

The working group is aware that any proposal for change in this area has the potential to cause concern for parents and teachers. Therefore, before any decision is taken to change the current resourcing system, the Department of Education and Skills would consult further with parents, teachers, school management bodies and other education partners to ensure that their views are taken on board. The working group is very confident that the proposed new model is a better and fairer way to allocate available teaching resources for students with special educational needs.

# Some Questions and Answers







## 1. How would I know if my child is entitled to additional teaching support in school and how much support would he/she get?

Decisions on how additional support teachers are used would be taken at school level. Through normal class work, homework and general class interaction, teachers are able to identify the students who are in need of additional support. The amount of additional support provided would vary from student to student.

Schools use their resources in many different ways to provide as much support as possible for students. Additional teaching support can be provided in the ordinary classroom by the class teacher or through team teaching with a support teacher. It can also be provided through small group teaching both inside and outside the classroom or one to one teaching. The intention is always that students with the greatest level of need are provided with the greatest level of support and that support addresses the student's identified learning needs.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed a system to help all schools to identify and support children with special educational needs. This system is known as the NEPS Continuum of Support and it works at three different levels:

- **classroom level** (support for all students) where the main person involved is the class/subject teacher,
- **school support level** (support for some students) where additional support teachers are involved, and
- **school support plus level** (support for a few) where children with more complex learning needs may see a NEPS psychologist and have an individualised programme in place.

Parents can learn more about this system on the NEPS website at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS-/NEPS-Model-of-Service.html>.

## **2. Are school principals and teachers equipped to make decisions about my child's education that previously required a psychological or other professional report?**

Assessment is central to good teaching and most teachers use school based assessment to identify their students' learning needs. Schools and teachers already use their own professional judgement to make decisions about students' learning and how best to use teaching resources to support that learning – through in-class support, group support or one to one support. They would continue to do so under the new proposed model.

Schools would also receive further guidance from the Department of Education and Skills that would build on the NEPS Continuum of Support and assist schools to make the most effective use of their additional teaching

resources in a way that is fair to students and promotes good outcomes for them.

The proposed new model is intended to ensure that schools can be resourced to provide support to all students who need additional help – whether the student has a professional assessment or is on a waiting list for a professional assessment. It wouldn't be the case that students, whose parents are able to make the best case for them or whose parents can afford to pay for private assessments, would get the most support.

Psychological and other professional reports would continue to be available for students where the need for such reports is clear for health and social reasons. Parents with any concerns regarding their child's level of development should continue to seek a referral to the appropriate HSE or NEPS specialist for assessment. However, one of the difficulties with the current system is that there are long delays in accessing such reports.

**3. My son already has a diagnosis of disability – would he automatically receive additional support or keep the support he already has?**

Your son would receive additional teaching support under the proposed new model if the school, using its school based assessment and the NEPS Continuum of Support, identifies that your son has learning needs associated with his diagnosis. Two children with the same diagnosis can have very different learning support needs in school. Under the proposed new model your son would receive teaching support based on his learning needs rather than on his diagnosis of disability – this may be the same

level of support, more support or less support. Our research indicates that this is a better way to allocate support because a category of disability on its own tells us very little about the level or type of support that a child needs in school.

**4. I think my daughter has scored below average on the standardised tests; would she get support under the proposed new model?**

There are several reasons why your daughter might score at or below average on a standardised test. For example, your daughter could have had an 'off' day when the reading or mathematics test was administered or may not have understood the test instructions. If this was the case, the test result doesn't give a true picture of her ability. On the other hand your daughter could have a real difficulty with reading or mathematics which the standardised test result has picked up.

The proposed new model would change the basis for allocating additional special education teachers to schools. For the first time, every student who scores below average (STen score 3 or lower) on a standardised test of reading or mathematics would be included in building the school's overall educational profile and its need for additional teaching support. (You can learn more about what a STen score is and what it means at: [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Parents/Primary/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Parents/Primary/)).

The first job of the school is therefore to identify the reason for your daughter's score on the standardised test. This will be done through reviewing her work and general class interaction, talking with previous teachers and with her parents and comparing her current score with previous scores and with other test results. It could also involve administering a further diagnostic test, to identify if your daughter has a particular learning difficulty.

If, after further investigation, the school concludes that your daughter's low score was caused by a particular learning need or difficulty, then the school will consult with you regarding the best means of supporting your daughter's learning.

The results of standardised tests assist your school to identify your daughter's learning needs and to provide the appropriate support for her.

### **5. How would my school-going child get a professional assessment where this is needed?**

The proposed new model is recommending a different way to allocate additional teachers to schools. It is not changing how children get a professional assessment where this is needed.

If your child has been receiving support at the school support stage and the teachers have on-going concerns about his / her progress, they may seek your permission to consult with the NEPS psychologist regarding your child's

learning programme. Equally, if you think that your child may need to be seen by a NEPS psychologist, you should discuss this with your child's teacher, support teacher and/or school principal. Not every child needs to meet a psychologist in person but every school can refer a child to a NEPS psychologist.

Other assessments, such as speech and language, occupational therapy, clinical psychology would continue to be accessed in the same way as they currently are through the relevant HSE services.

**6. The proposed new model would mean that each school can decide itself how much support my child receives. What if, as a parent, I don't agree with the level of support being given to my child?**

The working group has recommended that the Department of Education and Skills put in place an external appeals process through which parents can appeal the school's decision.

At the moment, each school decides the level of support that is provided to children with learning difficulties and certain special educational needs e.g. dyslexia. We know that schools do this well. It is proposed that this is extended to cover all special educational needs. A category of disability, by itself, does not identify how much support a child should receive – two students, with the same disability can need completely different levels of support.

Schools use their own knowledge of their students to allocate teaching supports and they can also call on a wide number of support services to assist them. These include the Visiting Teacher Service, NEPS, Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) and other support services. Under the proposed new model, schools will continue to receive guidance when making decisions about supporting students' learning needs.

Under the proposed new model, schools would be required to have in place a process to review the information they used to ensure the appropriate level of support is being given to the child. The school should inform parents about this process and how to request a review of their child's additional teaching support if this is required.

However, despite these measures, you, as a parent, might still disagree with the level of support being given to your child. In that case you should discuss this first with your child's class /subject teacher or his/her support teacher. You could also

discuss these issues with the school principal and if necessary, at a later point with the Chairperson of your Board of Management.

## **7. Would teachers have to develop learning plans and would parents be involved?**

Yes, the working group has recommended that schools would be required to develop learning plans for students who are receiving additional support and that parents be involved in developing and reviewing these plans, as appropriate, to the detail of the plan. At the moment, many teachers of students with special educational needs devise individual learning plans

for their students and in many cases parents are involved in agreeing learning targets and ways in which they can support their child's learning. Students' learning plans contain information about goal setting, progress to date, and learning outcomes. In many cases also, teachers use the NEPS Continuum of Support to guide this assessment, planning, teaching and review. Schools would be required to continue this practice under the new model.

The level of detail in a student's learning plan should match the level of the student's learning need and the intensity of support required by the student. For example the learning plans would be expected to be more detailed for the student who requires small group or individualised attention and less detailed for the student receiving in-class support only. The level of parents and students involvement in the development of the plan should also be in proportion to the level of detail required in the plan.

Schools would be required to provide annual reports to the NCSE on how additional teaching resources were used for students with special educational needs. These reports would include information on student progress and student outcomes achieved through the learning plan process.

**8. Could parents find out about the level of additional teaching support allocated to a school when making decisions about where to send their child?**

Parents would be able to find out the level of additional teaching support allocated to every school. This information is currently published on the NCSE website for every primary and post-primary school in the country and would continue to be available under the proposed new model.

However the educational profile of each school is determined by a lot of different and sometimes sensitive information. Only the school's teaching allocation would be published.

**9. Is this really a cut?**

The proposed new model is intended to provide a better and fairer way to distribute the over 10,000 special educational teacher posts to schools.<sup>4</sup> It does not contribute in any way to deciding the number of teaching posts made available for special education.

The number of teacher posts allocated for special education is determined each year by the Minister as part of the budgetary process. The proposed new model has no impact on this process.

4 The number of learning support and resource teacher posts will increase to over 11,000 for the 2014/2015 school year.



**10. What happens if more students with complex special educational needs arrive in my child's school after all the teacher posts have been allocated?**

Your school would have the same level of additional teaching resources in place for two years. Schools have told us that generally there is not much change in their profile over this period of time and that they would welcome the stability that a two-year fixed allocation would give to their school in terms of their staffing.

The Department of Education and Skills already has a process in place to consider the needs of schools with significant annual growth or reduction in their student numbers.

However, the proposed new model would allow for support to be provided to schools where unplanned and exceptional circumstances arise, which could not have been anticipated in the school's educational profile. An example might be where a number of students with very complex needs enter a very small school at a point during the year. A facility would be in place for schools to apply for extra support to deal with such exceptional cases.