

Press Release 17th May 2013
A New Vision for Supporting Special Educational Needs

While investment in Special Educational Supports is at an all-time high, NCSE advises that changes to educational policy can deliver better outcomes

- NCSE review of special education has found that students with special educational needs are being well supported in schools and making good progress
- NCSE now recommending improvements to current system to ensure that additional teaching supports are allocated in line with the profile of educational need in each school
- NCSE is recommending changes to ensure children with special educational needs have immediate access to additional teaching support in mainstream schools

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) today advised the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, on how to use special educational supports to maximum effect to drive improved outcomes for children with special educational needs.

As part of a year-long review, the NCSE consulted with students, parents, schools, teachers, principals, HSE professionals, advocacy groups, special needs assistants and others to inform its 28 recommendations on how best to support students with special educational needs in schools in the future. This is the first comprehensive review of special educational needs resources in over 20 years.

Launching its policy advice paper, NCSE Chief Executive, Teresa Griffin, said. "Student needs are at the centre of all of the NCSE's proposals and recommendations. We want all children with special educational needs to be welcome to enrol in schools where teaching resources are already in place and where teachers can focus on each student's individual needs".

The NCSE review found that students with special educational needs are well supported in schools and are making good progress. One of its key recommendations is to ensure that all children with special educational needs can fully access the extensive supports available within the school system.

The NCSE noted the Department of Education and Skills annual €1.3 billion spend on supporting students with special educational needs in schools is at record high levels despite the continuing economic difficulties. This equates to 15 per cent of the DES total spend on education each year and compares with the €468 million allocated for special educational needs in schools in 2004.

These funds go towards providing 10,000 learning support and resource teachers, more than 630 special classes, over 10,000 special needs assistants, the National Educational Psychological Service, school transport and other services available in primary and secondary schools.

The recommendations being made by the NCSE are focused on refining where and how the supports are targeted to ensure all children with special educational needs have fair and equitable access to supports.

In the review, the NCSE found that some parents and schools find it difficult to access a diagnosis of disability which is needed to trigger additional teaching support for students with

more complex disabilities. The NCSE has called for a new model to be developed for the allocation of additional teaching resources to mainstream schools - one that is based on the profiled need of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability.

It also notes that the learning profile of pupils can vary from school to school. Some schools have a number of students with learning difficulties while others have fewer. The NCSE is recommending that any new system of allocating teaching resources should be targeted in line with the profile of educational need in each mainstream school rather than the current system of linking them to a particular category of disability, size of enrolment or number of class teachers.

Noting that some children still find it difficult to enrol in a school, the NCSE has recommended the introduction of a robust regulatory enrolment framework to ensure that every child with special educational needs can access a school placement.

Ms Griffin was very aware that proposals for change can cause some anxiety to parents and schools and said that if the 28 recommendations are adopted, it will not result in reductions to the €1.3bn annual spend in special education supports.

“The NCSE cares about children with special educational needs. We want these children to be welcome and able to enrol in schools where teaching resources are already in place and individualised planning is provided by teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary to provide for the education and care of all students. Our advice focuses on the supports students require in schools and their needs are at the centre of all proposals and recommendations. It will be necessary now for all stakeholders to have time to fully consider the recommendations.” Ms Griffin said.

Key recommendations include:

- Commencing the Education for Person with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 as soon as resources permit. The NCSE recognises that in the current economic climate resources are not available to permit this.
- The adoption of a robust regulatory enrolment framework to ensure all children with special educational needs can access a school placement
- That teaching resources are allocated equitably to schools in line with their educational profile of need without the need for a diagnosis of disability.
- That a framework is developed to improve teachers’ knowledge and expertise in supporting and educating students with special educational needs.
- To ensure that additional supports drive improved educational outcomes through individualised planning.
- The provision of additional funding to special schools and special classes to allow them to purchase and replace equipment.

The NCSE policy advice paper: ‘Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools’ is available for download at www.ncse.ie.

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