

Press Release
18th June, 2014
NCSE sweeping proposals to transform special education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) today published proposals to greatly improve how schools are resourced to support students with special educational needs.

An NCSE working group is recommending that educational need is used as the basis to allocate additional teaching support to schools. Based on national and international research, the NCSE has identified a set of clear criteria that indicate a school's need for additional teaching resources. These include the number of enrolled students with very complex special educational needs, overall levels of academic achievement and a school's socio-economic context.

The NCSE found that the current learning support teacher scheme allocates additional teaching support irrespective of the need for support in a school. It also found that the current resource teacher allocation scheme relies on an individual diagnosis, which can lead to some students waiting much longer than others to receive additional help in school.

Eamon Stack, Chairperson of the working group and former Chief Inspector, stated that: "The NCSE wants the more than 11,000 additional teacher posts available to be allocated on the basis of a school's need for such support. This is a better way to allocate teaching resources to schools for students who have special educational needs and I am confident that our proposal has the potential to make a real difference to improving outcomes for them.'

Mary Byrne, NCSE Head of Special Education, pointed out that: "Allocating learning support to a school on the basis of overall enrolment, rather than need, is clearly inequitable. The current resource teaching allocation system is also unfair because resource teaching support is dependent on a formal diagnosis of disability. Some parents are able to pay for a quick private diagnosis while other parents can't afford this, meaning that their children have to wait for additional teaching support. This is wrong and shouldn't be allowed to continue."

The proposed new model would ensure that more than 11,000 additional teacher posts are allocated where needed and would promote inclusion and early intervention. It would also mean that students with special educational needs could be helped as soon as their difficulties are identified in school.

Katherine O'Leary, a parent of children with special educational needs and a member of the NCSE working group, said "This proposed model would make sure that vital teaching resources are allocated to students with special educational needs as soon as they require it. I'm particularly happy about the removal of the need to have a diagnosis in place before that happens. This will

reduce stress on parents. If this report was to be fully implemented, I'm confident that our students with special educational needs would get the necessary teaching support when they need it."

The NCSE understands that the Minister will now immediately start a process of consultation on the proposed new model with the education partners.

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Notes to Editor

1. National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

The NCSE provides schools with the additional educational supports they need to help children with special educational needs receive an appropriate education. The NCSE commissions and conducts research and provides expert, independent and evidence-informed policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education for children and young adults. Further information can be found on our website www.ncse.ie.

2. Why does the current system need to change?

- All mainstream 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. This is unfair as the need for learning support can differ from school to school. For example, 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.
- A formal diagnosis of disability is required before resource teaching support is provided. 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.
- Some parents pay large sums of money for private consultants to diagnose their children to avoid the waiting lists. Children from less well-off families have to wait longer for public diagnostic services to get the supports in school.
- Every student with the same category of disability gets the same level of resource teaching support, irrespective of age or ability. But 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.
- Health and educational professionals take significant time to diagnose a child's disability. The time spent diagnosing a disability could be better used in providing the necessary professional treatment, intervention and therapeutic support for the child.

3. What benefits will the new model bring to students?

- 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.

4. How will this new model work?

There are over 11,000 additional teacher posts in our schools at present. 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 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.
- The results of standardised tests.
- The social context of each school.

5. Members of NCSE Working Group to develop a proposal for a new model

1. Eamon Stack (Chair), Chairperson of NCSE and former Chief Inspector, DES
2. Don Mahon, Assistant Chief Inspector, DES
3. Maureen Costello, NCSE Council Member, Director, National Educational Psychological Service
4. Peter Archer, Director, Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra
5. Brian MacGiollaPhadraig, Inspector, DES
6. James O'Grady, NCSE Council member, former National Manager for Disability Services, HSE and policy advisor to the Department of Health and Children
7. Áine Lynch, CEO, National Parents Council
8. Katherine O'Leary, Parent of two children with disabilities and former director, Inclusion Ireland,
9. Anne English, Principal, primary school
10. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, Principal, post-primary school
11. Pat Kinsella, NCSE Council member and former Principal, post-primary school
12. Eithne Fitzgerald, NCSE Council member and Head of Policy and Research, National Disability Authority
13. Albert O'Donoghue, Assistant Principal Officer, Department of Children and Youth Affairs
14. Mary Byrne (Secretary), Head of Special Education, NCSE

6. Consultation

An extensive consultation process was undertaken with stakeholders to inform the development of the working group report. Consultation meetings were held with the HSE, teachers, principals, union officials, parents, school management bodies, National Educational Psychological Services, advocacy groups, the Inspectorate, and Special Educational Needs Organisers.