

# CHANGING SCHOOLS

## Moving between special and mainstream settings

Guidelines for Parents/Guardians of Students  
with Special Educational Needs

NCSE 2016



The word 'parent' in this document should be taken to include guardians of children.

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## Introduction

Most students with special educational needs attend mainstream classes in their local school and are supported by a class teacher and where appropriate, a learning support/resource teacher service. Depending on their learning needs some students may be better placed in a more specialised setting where classes have very small numbers. Specialised settings include separate special schools or a special class in a mainstream school. Some students may start in a mainstream class and later move to a special class or special school and vice versa.

There are a number of reasons why parents make the decision to move their children from one educational setting to another. Their children may need a completely differentiated programme to typical students in the mainstream school. They may be very stressed because they are overwhelmed by the demands of mainstream and unable to cope. A child may have made good progress in a special school and is now ready to transfer to mainstream with appropriate supports. The school or other professional may have suggested a change following regular review of the student's progress and outcomes.

**These are some of the moves that may take place:**

- Special school to special class in a mainstream school
- Special class to fulltime mainstream class
- Mainstream class to special class or special school
- Between two different types of special classes.

Whatever the move, this can be a worrying time for you and for your child. You may worry about whether he/she is independent enough or has the ability for mainstream or the social skills to make friends in the new situation. If a student is moving from a special class to fulltime mainstream, you may be concerned about whether your child will be able to manage in a bigger class or whether he/she will fall behind. If a student is moving from a mainstream school to a special class or special school, you may have worries about your child leaving friends, siblings and teachers behind and/or possibly having to manage a longer journey to school.

This pamphlet is intended to provide information and practical guidance about how to support your child to make a successful transition.

**Every year students with special educational needs successfully make transitions between educational settings.**

## Important steps in planning the transition

There are a number of steps involved in planning for your child to change their educational setting. These steps are summarised below. Further information and advice about each step is provided in the sections that follow.

- Step 1:** Making the decision
- Step 2:** Enrolment
- Step 3:** Plan with the school
- Step 4:** Preparing for change

# Step 1: Making the Decision

As a parent you make the final decision about your child's educational placement. The decision for students with complex special educational needs is usually informed by advice and guidance from education and health professionals such as class teachers, resource/learning support teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and so on.

Psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development. Each psychologist is assigned to a group of schools and may be involved with schools in an advisory capacity, when students with complex special educational needs are changing schools or settings.

Parents may also find it helpful to contact the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) of the new school/class in preparation for any issues that may arise. SENOs provide a direct service to the parents of children with special educational needs and to schools within designated geographical areas.

You may consider whether you wish to move your child following an ongoing review of your child's needs and engagement with the school and other professionals.

Your decision will be based on how your child's needs are changing as he/she develops over time and available placement options such as mainstream or special settings.

## Step 2: Enrolment procedures

If the decision involves your child changing schools, you need to apply to the new school for a place. Schools have different rules and regulations about how children are enrolled. Many schools set a closing date by which a child must be enrolled. You can find out about this from the school principal or from the school's website and you must follow the school's enrolment procedures. Your child stays in his existing school until he has been enrolled in the new school.

The new school may need time to put adequate planning in place. Some of this planning can take time, for example, if the school building needs to be adapted, or the school needs to upskill teaching staff, or your child needs specialist equipment.

Some schools allow enrolment mid-year where they have places and where no adaptation or additional resources are required. If you are unable to find a school place for your child, there are people to help you. All parents can contact the Educational Welfare Service. Contact details for their services are available on the Tusla website at: <http://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/education-and-welfare/>.

As your child has special educational needs, you can also contact your local SENO for assistance. His/her contact details are available on the NCSE website at: <http://ncse.ie/seno-contact-list>.

**If you are unable to find a school place for your child, there are people to help you.**



## Step 3: Plan with the school

Once the decision is made for your child to change educational setting, preparation and planning for the transition should start as soon as possible and a transition plan developed. Ideally transition should take place at the start of the school year to minimise disruption to everyone. This however may not be possible in all cases and there can be certain situations when a student may move mid-year. Preparation and planning are still important but may need to happen in a shorter time frame.

Every student is unique and has individual strengths and needs which ought to be considered as part of the preparation process. You and your child must be at the centre of this process. Where a student has complex special educational needs, it is good practice for the school to arrange a **planning meeting**. Parents, student (where appropriate), principal and/or members of the school's special education team, (such as class teachers or resource/learning support teachers or year heads in post-primary) may attend this meeting.

Sharing information can ease transition. This meeting is an opportunity for you and your child to share your hopes, expectations and concerns with the school and raise any anxieties you may have. It is also an opportunity for schools to provide parents with information affecting their child. You may wish to find out who will be your child's key support in the school and with whom you should make contact if any concerns arise.

You can assist by identifying your child's areas of strength, abilities and difficulties. You can share your knowledge and experience of what works best in helping your child to learn. This information could be very useful to the staff in the new school to allow them to plan for your child. It is also good to have agreed a joint approach to any difficulties that may arise. If necessary, ask that your son/daughter is supported in the beginning when moving from class to class in the new school.

What needs to be planned for a successful transition:

- Sharing relevant information is essential to a successful transition. The relevant information that a school requires to assist your child's transition may include, as appropriate, information on your child's:
  - Learning needs
  - Social and communication needs
  - Care needs, for example, dressing, toileting, mobility and medication needs
  - Sensory needs such as over sensitivity to noise, textures, lights
  - Physical needs that require environmental adaptations such as adaptations to the school building, adapted seating or other specialised equipment.
- As a parent you may also wish to share information with the new school about:
  - Your hopes, expectations and concerns
  - Your child's areas of strength, abilities and difficulties
  - Your knowledge and experience of what works best in helping your child to learn
  - Relevant professional reports (e.g. reports written by psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists). This information can help the school to decide if school policies need to be developed or revised around caring for a student with special educational needs or medical needs.

It is important to give the school any information necessary to assist your child's transfer so that the school can plan to meet his/her needs to the greatest extent possible. This includes any relevant professional reports (e.g. reports written by psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and so on) as these can help to ensure that the school is aware of your child's strengths, abilities and

needs. This information can also help the school to decide if school policies need to be developed or revised around caring for a student with special educational needs or medical needs, e.g. behaviour policies or administration of medications policy.

**It is important to allow enough time to prepare and plan for the change.**

The school staff may find it helpful to consult with relevant professionals who work or have worked with your child. As relevant these may include visiting teachers for students who are blind/visually impaired and those who are deaf/hard of hearing, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists or physiotherapists. Where a student has a serious medical condition, the school may consult with your doctor. The school will seek your permission to contact these professionals. If necessary, some of these professionals may visit the school to assess the adaptability of its environment. You may wish to discuss who in the new setting will have access to any confidential information about your child.

Schools also use this information and professional reports to apply, on your behalf and with your consent, to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) for additional supports for your child, where these are necessary. Such additional supports can include: transport, assistive technology, access to special needs assistant support and resource teaching if your child is moving to a mainstream school setting. School also submits relevant applications to the Department of Education and Skills for necessary adaptations to school buildings, specialist equipment and so on. The school principal needs copies of professional reports to make such applications.

The school may decide that some of its teachers require additional training to meet your child's particular needs. The school can also consult with different agencies, for example, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Special Education Support Service (SESS) about teaching programmes and methodologies that may be appropriate to your child's learning needs. Contact details for these organisations are provided at the end of this booklet.

All of this planning takes time to put in place which is the reason it is so important to allow sufficient time for the change to take place. Various approaches are taken to transition depending on the age and needs of the student. In certain cases, the school or other professionals may advise that a staged approach is in the best interest of the student, for example, when a student is moving from a mainstream to a special class/school or vice versa. This gives the student time to adjust to the changed environment.

The two schools or classes involved may work together to devise and implement a transition programme over an appropriate period of time based on the student's strengths, abilities and needs. This may involve the school:

1. Meeting with parents and student
2. Liaising with relevant professionals
3. Visiting the student in existing placement, if applicable.

**Questions parents may wish to ask schools:**

1. How will the new school support my child?
2. As a parent, how can I help the school to support my child?
3. Who can my child go to if he/she is upset or worried?
4. How will my child be included in school/class activities with other students?
5. How many students will be in my child's class and what is the age range?
6. My child requires medication during school hours, how will this be managed?
7. How will my child access assistive technology, if required?
8. What forms of home-school communication will be available?
9. As a parent, who in the school should I contact if I am aware my child is having difficulty?
10. If needed, will special school transport be available for my child?
11. When will my child's placement be reviewed?

## Step 4: Preparing for change

Your child, to the degree that he/she can, needs to feel secure and to have a clear understanding of the move and the reasons for it. He/she may feel very anxious about leaving friends and teachers behind and worried about his/her ability to make friends in the new situation. He/she may feel that they are moving because they have failed in their last school. This of course is not the case. Your child needs to understand that the reason different school placements are available is so that students with different needs can be supported.

It is also important that parents prepare themselves for the change. Your confidence in the move will reassure your child and help him/her to settle down and feel comfortable in the new setting. In turn this will promote a sense of belonging and self-worth. This can take time and your child will require your support and patience.

You can support your child by talking with him/her, listening to his/her views and concerns and answering any questions he/she may have about the planned move. You can discuss new arrangements around uniform, timetable, lunch arrangements, after school activities. You can explain about any additional supports or equipment e.g. visual timetables, equipment, ICT and how these will help him/her.

Visiting the new school/class with your child may help to reduce anxiety. Photographs or video-recordings can also help familiarise him/her with the school staff, new teachers, layout of the school, the yard, the bus and so on.

Some parents help their children to produce a communication passport which introduces the student and sets out his/her interests, likes and dislikes. It explains how the student learns, what he/she finds easy and what is difficult. It can sometimes outline any sensory difficulties that the student may experience. A communication passport can be very useful for a student with limited communication skills or students who are non-verbal.

## Further Information

Further information can be found in the NCSE publications:

- Children with Special Educational Needs: Information Booklet for Parents
- Choosing a School: A Guide for Parents and Guardians of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs
- Post-School Education and Training Information on Options for Adults and School Leavers with Disabilities

The NCSE has also published **nine information leaflets on particular areas of special educational needs**, to explain how the education system supports students with special educational needs.

The information leaflets cover: general learning disabilities; specific learning disabilities; emotional and/or behavioural difficulties or disorders; physical disabilities; blind/visual impairment; specific speech and language disorder; deaf and hard of hearing; and autism spectrum disorder. There is also a leaflet to explain the SNA scheme.

The information booklets and leaflets are available from your local SENO or on the NCSE website at <http://ncse.ie/information-booklets-pamphlets-2>.

The following website has very useful suggestions for parents to help 0-12 year olds to learn. Information is divided across five different age groups: 0-2 years, 3-4, 5-7, 8-9 and 10-12 years.

NALA's Help My Kid Learn at: [www.helpmykidlearn.ie](http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie).

# Useful Contacts

**Health Centre:**

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

**NCSE SENOs:** Through your school or at:

[www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

**Department of Education and Skills:**

[www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

**National Adult Literacy Association  
(NALA) Help My Kid Learn:**

[www.helpmykidlearn.ie](http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie)

**National Parents Council (Post-Primary):**

[www.npcpp.ie](http://www.npcpp.ie)

**National Parents Council (Primary):**

[www.npc.ie](http://www.npc.ie)

**Special Needs Parents Association:**

[www.specialneedsparents.ie](http://www.specialneedsparents.ie)

**Tusla:**

[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

**Visiting Teacher Service:**

(for children who are blind/visually impaired or deaf/hard of hearing)

<http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Visiting-Teacher-Service>

