

NCSE Press Release 15th July 2016

Major education report finds 14,000 students have autism diagnosis

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) today published the first major report on the education of students with autism in almost 14 years. This report follows an extensive research and consultation process.

The report found that one in every 65 students or 1.5% of the schools population has a diagnosis of autism. This equates to approximately 14,000 students and is much higher than the 1 in every 100 previously estimated¹. The NCSE report shows:

- There has been substantial increase in investment - over €300m is now invested annually on additional teaching, technology and other supports specifically for children and young people with autism.
- Students with autism are generally well supported in schools, especially at primary level though support at post-primary level requires further development.
- Teacher knowledge and understanding of autism is greatly improved but requires further improvement.
- Concern that the basis for two educational schemes - early intervention and the extended school year (July provision) – may be inequitable as it is only available to two disability categories.
- Concern that aspects of the July provision scheme could result in potentially unsafe environments for both students and staff.

The research identified 34 evidence-informed interventions for use in schools. Ms Teresa Griffin, CEO of the NCSE said: “We know that students with autism have different individual needs and can respond differently to interventions. Research does not support any one approach or methodology as being best for all students. We need a flexible and responsive educational system which can draw on, and use, a range of evidence-informed interventions in line with each student’s needs”.

The report’s key recommendations include:

1. More investment is needed to develop teacher knowledge, skills and understanding of autism.
2. Teachers should be able to select and use evidence informed interventions appropriately according to students’ need.
3. A need for better resourced multidisciplinary health teams for children with autism
4. The development of a safe, social summer day-activity programme for all students with complex educational needs to replace the July Provision scheme.

The NCSE estimates that implementing the school based recommendations in this report will cost an additional €20m per annum.

The Department of Education and Skills has established an implementation group to consider the recommendations arising in this report.

Two research reports commissioned by the NCSE to inform the report are also being published today and are available on the NCSE website, along with the policy advice report. These are:

1. Educating Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorder – A Systematic Literature Review; conducted by Manchester University
2. An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder; conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

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¹ DCU (2013) study reported a 1 in 100 (1%) autism prevalence rate among Irish children. The Task Force on Autism (2001) estimated a general population prevalence of 1 in 179 people or 0.56% of the general population.

Notes to editors

Prevalence rate

Almost 14,000 students in schools have been diagnosed with autism – this is 1 in every 65 students in schools and is in line with prevalence rates recently reported in the UK and US. A previous estimate in Ireland in 2013 was 1 in every 100 students².

Investment in education

There has been substantial investment in the education of students with autism over the 14 years since the publication of the last major report on autism in 2001³. Over €300m is now invested annually in providing additional resources specifically to support students with autism in schools enabling:

- 63% of students to attend mainstream schools
- 23% to attend special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools and
- 14% to attend special schools.

There are now over:

- 2,200 extra teachers in mainstream schools specifically to support autism
- 900 special classes for students with autism – up from fewer than 80 in 2001
- 20 special schools specifically for students with autism.

Other recommendations in the report

In addition to the recommendations above, the NCSE also recommends the following in the report:

- Schools to be supported by adequately resourced support services, e.g. National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Inclusion Support Service.
- Teachers to have a minimum of three years' experience before being appointed to specialist settings.
- Development of an inclusive system of appropriately resourced pre-schools, with appropriately qualified staff.
- Development of clear guidelines to schools on responding to crisis situations; including the provision of 'quiet spaces' for students with autism.
- As well as teachers, other school personnel to be trained to be autism aware.
- The NCSE to have authority to instruct a school to open a special class when deemed necessary.
- Post-school education, training and adult services options need to be reviewed by all Government Departments, working together, to ensure sufficient and appropriate placements are available for students with autism.
- Provision of advice and training to parents and families.

The basis of the report

The NCSE commissioned two research studies, considered international research findings and practice overseas and spent over a year consulting with students, parents, advocacy groups and a host of education and health professionals to inform the report.

The 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

² DCU (2013)

³ Department of Education and Skills (2001) Educational Provision and Support for Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: the Report of the Task Force on Autism

Education and Skills on special education for children and young adults. Further information can be found on our website www.ncse.ie.