

NCSE Press Release
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Students to have access to better supports under proposed overhaul of €524m Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme

Students with additional care needs should be provided with access to in-school speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and behaviour support under a new school inclusion model being recommended by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). These students are currently supported by Special Needs Assistants because they have additional care needs such as toileting, mobility, eating and/or behaviour.

Outlining plans for a phased implementation of the proposed model, Ms Teresa Griffin, CEO, NCSE stated that 'up until now we have allocated over 14,000 Special Needs Assistants who have worked extremely hard to meet the needs of students with additional care needs. However the reality is that, to get the best outcomes, students need the right support from the right person at the right time. Students may need speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, nursing supports and people who are trained to help them manage challenging behaviours. They may need access to SNAs who are trained to meet their additional care needs'.

As part of an 18 month comprehensive review of the scheme, NCSE research established that SNA support works very well for some students – 11% of students no longer needed support within five years and 39% needed less support. There are other students who would not be able to attend school at all without continuing SNA support.

The NCSE found that to get better outcomes, some students need different types of intervention such as therapies which may not be readily available. It also found emerging evidence that the support some post-primary students receive needs to be more focussed on developing their independence and preparing them for life after school.

The NCSE is recommending a greater range of supports and expertise to be available in regional teams:

- 230 experts – specialist teachers, therapists, special educational needs organisers and behavioural practitioners – in 10 NCSE regional teams to work directly with students and schools
- A state funded national training programme for Inclusion Support Assistants (proposed new name for SNAs)
- Students to have access to support without the need for a diagnosis of disability
- Therapy services to be available for students who require them
- Guidelines for schools on the management of complex medical and behavioural needs
- A staffing and funding package for special schools and special classes

The review report is published today on the NCSE website- www.ncse.ie

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For queries, please contact Alan Cantwell, Insight Consultants: 086 8147855

Notes for the editor

The NCSE has undertaken a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme. This involved:

- 8 different pieces of national and international research
- 37 consultation sessions with stakeholders
- 330 written submissions received following a public consultation process
- 10 school visits
- 1 Working Group established to specifically review the scheme

The scheme funds the employment of over 14,000 SNAs and supports 34,600 students with additional care needs. The scheme currently costs €525m.

The NCSE concluded that, while SNAs are really valued by parents and teachers and works well for many younger students and those who have more traditional type care needs, radical change is needed to improve outcomes for students.

Some findings from the NCSE research

- Every country has a scheme to provide additional supports for students with care needs in schools – though there is considerable variance in terms of the types of support provided
- Paraprofessionals¹ are effective in assisting schools to meet student care needs – but evidence for the effectiveness of paraprofessional support in the education of students is inconclusive at best with some high quality research showing the more support students received from support staff, the less academic progress they made
- Given adequate training and support, paraprofessionals can support students in certain specific evidence-informed interventions with positive outcomes
- In certain situations, peer support works better than adult paraprofessional support
- Language skills play a critical part in a child's overall cognitive and social development including his/her readiness for learning and the development of literacy and numeracy – in-school models of support for the provision of speech and language therapy shows promise.

Some of the NCSE recommendations

- A broader range of support options is made available in 10 regional teams including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and behavioural practitioners
- Inclusion Support Assistants should be the new title for the current SNA role
- Training to be provided for Inclusion Support Assistants as well as teachers and the wider school community
- Access to support from Inclusion Support Assistants or the broader range of supports should be in line with student need and not be dependent on a diagnosis of disability
- Special Schools and Special Classes need a staffing and funding package which reflects the level of need in these schools and classes
- In-school therapy services should be available
- Ring-fenced funding should be provided to ensure the availability of multi-disciplinary clinical support for students who need this level of intervention
- There should be explicit communication and alignment between home, school and clinical services
- Nursing-led support should be provided as necessary

Phased Introduction

¹ The term 'paraprofessional' is used interchangeably in the literature with other terms such as teaching assistant, para educator, instructional assistant, teaching assistant, educational assistant, teacher's aide or classroom assistant.

- An In-School therapy demonstration project is being established in 76 schools and 75 pre-schools with effect from September 2018. This service is being managed by the NCSE with 31 therapists seconded from the HSE. The project will be evaluated during the 2018/2019 school year to inform the best framework for a national in-school therapy service
- 10 NCSE regional support teams are being created and will be staffed initially with specialist teachers and special education needs organisers
- Planning for a national training programme for Inclusion Support Assistants will commence during the 2018/2019 school year