

COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT SCHEME

A New School Inclusion Model to Deliver the Right Supports
at the Right Time to Students with Additional Care Needs

A booklet for parents/guardians and students.

NCSE 2018



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

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Introduction

The Minister for Education and Skills asked the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to review the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme and to advise him on what support options are needed to provide better outcomes for students with additional care needs.

The SNA scheme assists schools to support students with additional care needs. These students cannot attend or take part in school without extra assistance with, for example, toileting or mobility or because they have very complex medical or behavioural needs. We explain what we mean by additional care needs in the box at the end of this section.

The NCSE takes very seriously our responsibility to provide the Minister with advice that is expert, independent and evidence-based. The Government invests over €450m in the SNA scheme every year and the Minister is anxious to ensure the right supports are in place to drive better outcomes for students.

Our review of the SNA scheme takes national and international research into account. We held 37 consultation meetings with educational partners including parents, students, teachers and principals. We visited schools to see how the scheme is working. We had presentations from experts. We spent time thinking about and analysing our findings before we gave our advice to the Minister in March 2018.

We are advising the Minister that he needs to improve supports for students with additional care needs. We are recommending a new School Inclusion Model to deliver the right supports at the right time to students with additional care needs.

This booklet is to help parents/guardians and students understand what the NCSE found and why we are recommending that a new and improved model of support is needed. Our full report on the review is available on the NCSE website at: <http://ncse.ie/policy-advice>.

What is meant by additional care needs?

Students can have a very wide range of additional care and support needs that vary in how complex or severe they can be.

Many students' care and support needs can be met by teachers without the need for any further support.

Other students have additional care needs that are more complex and are a real barrier to their ability to learn and take part in school. These students require extra support to attend and take part in school, over and above what teachers can provide.

Additional care needs can arise because of significant medical needs, physical needs, sensory (hearing and visual) needs, social communication and social interaction needs and/or learning needs.

In addition, a small number of students have additional care needs arising from serious emotional and behavioural disorders.

What did the NCSE find?

We found that the SNA scheme is really important. The scheme has, over the past 20 years, greatly assisted thousands of students with additional care needs to attend school.

This year, some 14,000 SNAs will support over 34, 600 students and their work is really valued by parents, teachers and students. There is great loyalty and a strong attachment between many schools, students, parents and their SNAs.

We found that SNA support works really well for younger children and for certain types of care needs, for example, mobility, toileting, eating. It is a flexible scheme so support can increase, stay the same or reduce, in response to changes in students' care needs.

We also found that there are gaps in services and that a new and improved model should be put in place.

So why did the NCSE advise a new and improved model was needed?

Minister Richard Bruton wants the Irish Education and Training System to be the best in Europe by 2026. For this to happen, we have advised that improvements are necessary to enable students with additional care needs to achieve better outcomes. We outline below the main reasons why we think a new and improved model of support is necessary.

Improvement	Strengthening the Current System
State funding will be provided for SNA upskilling and training.	<p>The entry level for SNAs is 3 Grade Ds at Junior Certificate. No specific training is required or funded for SNAs – although many SNAs have themselves availed of extra training and achieved higher levels of qualifications.</p> <p>SNAs are sometimes expected to support students who need complex medical procedures. Some situations may require specific training and supervision from medical personnel. This isn't always available or, when provided, it is not always sufficient. Examples include: tracheostomy care, management of severe epilepsy, complex catheterisation and so on.</p>

Improvement	Strengthening the Current System
	<p>We recommended that SNAs be re-named as Inclusion Support Assistants to reflect that their role is about promoting independence and inclusion. This moves away from special needs terminology that some students find difficult.</p> <p>The School Inclusion Model will ensure that all inclusion support assistants have the same basic level of training. They will also have access to tailored training that is appropriate to the needs of the child. This training will be funded by the State. Medical supervision of training and/or interventions will be available as needed.</p>
<p>Teachers and other members of the school community will have further training and upskilling on inclusion.</p>	<p>We have established that additional training should be provided to teachers, inclusion support assistants and the wider school community including, as appropriate, parents to ensure that a consistent approach is taken at home and in school.</p> <p>The School Inclusion Model will provide for 230 dedicated personnel in 10 NCSE teams to plan and provide upskilling and training on a regional basis.</p>
<p>Students will have immediate access to SNA support when required.</p>	<p>Parents and teachers are very frustrated that students still need a diagnosis of disability to access SNA support. There can be long waiting lists for professional assessment in many parts of the country.</p> <p>Getting a formal diagnosis in time to apply for an SNA can be a cause of real worry for parents, frustration for principals and pressure for diagnosing professionals. As a result, there can be significant delays in a student getting access to SNA support.</p>

Improvement	Strengthening the Current System
	<p>Some students do not fall neatly into a disability category e.g. those with mental health issues but schools, despite having obvious need for support, may not apply for SNA support for these students.</p> <p>The School Inclusion Model will provide for inclusion support assistants to be allocated to schools without a formal application process, unless a school currently has no SNAs. This means that support is available on enrolment whether the student has a diagnosis of disability or not.</p>
<p>Students will have age-appropriate supports.</p>	<p>Research shows that some students, particularly at post-primary, find that SNAs can act as a barrier to interaction with their fellow students.</p> <p>We have found that the SNA scheme is less suitable for some post-primary aged students who can feel stigmatised and/or isolated from their peers by having an adult associated with them in school.</p> <p>Under the School Inclusion Model different types of age-appropriate support will be available e.g. technology, therapy supports, specialist teaching and so on.</p>
<p>Additional support will be focussed on building confidence and independence.</p>	<p>Researchers have reported that some employers, adult services and parents feel that their young adult children have not been well-prepared for life after school – they have become too dependent on support in their later years at school. They then find it very hard to cope after school when this level of support is no longer available to them, even though they are capable of greater independence.</p>

Improvement	Strengthening the Current System
	The School Inclusion Model aims to re-focus all supports and interventions at developing students' independent living skills and confidence in line with their age and ability.

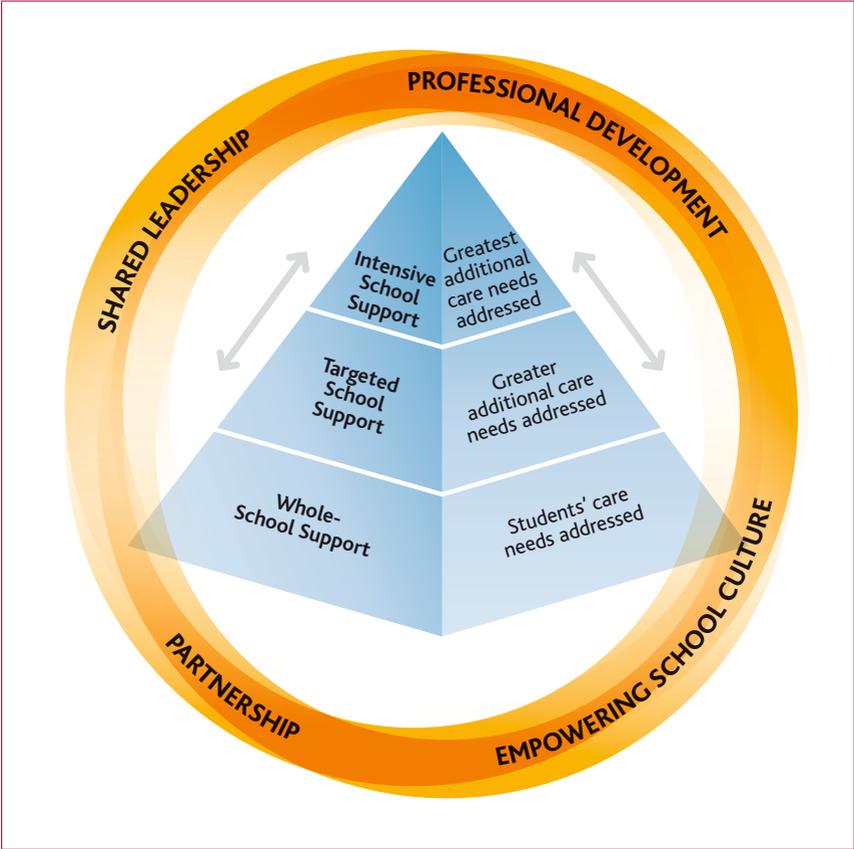


What is the new School Inclusion Model of support recommended by the NCSE?

The NCSE is proposing a new School Inclusion Model of support to build schools' capacity to include students with additional care needs. There will be a broader range of support options available so that students will have access to the right support at the right time delivered by appropriately qualified personnel.

Students with the greatest need will have access to the most support and support will be faded or intensified as needed by the student – this is in keeping with international best practice of a “continuum of support”.

Figure 1: Continuum of Support



Under this model:

- SNAs will continue to be one of the support options available for students with additional care needs. They will be re-named as Inclusion Support Assistants and have access to a state-funded national training programme. The focus of their work will be to build students' independence and confidence, to the greatest extent possible in line with students' ability and age.
- Inclusion Support Assistants will be pre-allocated to schools in line with schools' needs.
- Students will no longer require a formal disability diagnosis to receive additional support in school.
- An in-school therapy service will be available.
- A nurse-led service will be available for students with complex medical needs.
- NCSE will have ten regional support teams with specialist teachers, SENOS, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, behaviour experts working to support schools and parents.
- The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) will be better staffed.
- Children with more complex care needs who require clinical supports will have timely access to multidisciplinary supports.
- An appropriate staffing and funding package will be in place for special schools.
- Parents and schools will have access to an independent appeals process if they consider there is a mistake in the school's allocation of support.

The NCSE believes that the new model will bring benefits for students, parents and schools:

- Students will be able to achieve better outcomes because they have received support from the right person at the right time – and this support is faded or intensified in line with their needs during school.
- Parents and students will know that the right supports will be available from the first day they enrol in a school.
- Schools will be able to support students in line with their needs without having to wait for a professional diagnosis of disability.
- Professional assessments will be conducted for the right reason – to identify students’ strengths and needs and to inform their teaching, learning and care plan and **not** for the purpose of accessing State-funded supports.
- Teachers and principals will have access to regional training and in-school support.
- Inclusion support assistants will have access to state-funded training to enable them better support students.
- A robust appeals process will be in place for schools and parents concerned about the level of support provided.
- Schools will have greater certainty about their staffing levels allowing them to:
 - Plan their support for students with additional care needs as early as possible in advance of the next school year and
 - Plan for appropriate further training where necessary.

Some examples of how the new model will work for students

Jim is in junior infants and has spina bifida.

Under the current scheme, Jim would have access to classroom and special education teachers and may have access to an SNA.

Under the School Inclusion Model:

- Jim's school is better able to plan as the resources are in school on his arrival.
- Before Jim joins junior infants a member of his HSE early intervention team meets with the SENO and his school to discuss the kind of support that John might have in school.
- The school draws up a school support plan with the help of the early intervention team member and his parents.
- Jim receives learning support from his classroom and special education teacher.
- On enrolment, he has access to support from an inclusion support assistant to help him with toileting and personal care.
- He also gets help with getting around the school in his wheel-chair – when and if he needs this assistance.
- The school staff receives training and ongoing oversight from HSE staff that is tailored to John's needs, particularly about his catheterisation needs.

Emily is in 1st year post-primary and has challenging behaviour.

Under the current scheme, Emily would have access to classroom and special education teachers and may have access to an SNA.

Under the School Inclusion Model:

- Emily's teachers get greater assistance from the expanded school psychological service to develop her learning and behavioural support plan.
- Her class teacher and special education teacher receive in-school support from the NCSE support service on how to prevent Emily's challenging behaviour from arising and to help Emily to manage her own behaviour when she gets upset or angry.
- An occupational therapist visits the school to provide strategies to help Emily develop the ability to self-regulate her behaviour.
- If Emily needs to take a break from the classroom situation, a trained inclusion support assistant is there to provide support and supervision, under her teacher's supervision.
- If it becomes necessary in the future, Emily will have access to HSE clinical teams.

Emma is in 3rd class. She has complex medical needs and has a tracheostomy to assist her breathing.

Under the current scheme, Emma would have access to classroom and special education teachers and would have access to an SNA with limited training.

Under the School Inclusion Model:

- More expertise and support is available to guide the school in supporting Emma and drawing up a detailed care plan for her inclusion. This care plan includes what to do in an emergency situation.
- The school's support includes enhanced clinical services and involves the NCSE support service, Emma's medical team and her parents.
- Very importantly, Emma's principal, teachers, parents and inclusion support assistants receive joint training on tracheostomy care from a specialist nurse. This includes training on suctioning, cleaning her skin and parts of the tube and what action to take if difficulties arise.
- The nurse visits the school from time to time to make sure that everything is working well for Emma and that procedures are being correctly followed.

Jack is in 2nd year post-primary school and has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Under the current scheme, Jack attends a special class in a mainstream post-primary school. There are six students with ASD in this class with one teacher and two inclusion support assistants.

Under the School Inclusion Model:

- More expertise is available, if needed, to assist the school draw up Jack's school support plan in conjunction with his parents.
- This expertise is available from the NCSE Support Service, including expert teachers in autism, behaviour practitioners and therapists.
- In particular an occupational therapist provides advice on environmental adaptations that assist in the management of Jack's sensory difficulties.
- Jack's school support plan sets out clear goals and targets for him in the areas of communication, social interaction and behaviour.
- Jack's teachers and inclusion support assistants are able to avail of training on how to support students with ASD.

Some Questions and Answers

1. My son has a mild speech and language difficulty. He is about to start primary school. How will he benefit if the NCSE recommendations are implemented?

There will be a number of benefits for your son under the school inclusion model. From the time he starts school support will be available to him from his classroom teacher and if necessary from his school's special education teacher.

His teachers will be able to access advice from speech and language therapists so that an appropriate programme can be put in place for him.

Should your son require extra therapy support, there will be an in-school therapy service available to him.

We are confident that because your son will have timely access to the right supports, he will have better outcomes from school.

2. My daughter has an autism spectrum disorder. She is currently receiving support in an early intervention class but is going to a mainstream class next September.

Will she be entitled to an inclusion support assistant under the new model and how much support will she get?

Before your daughter joins her mainstream class you will be able to sit down with the school principal and discuss her needs. The school will work with you to develop an appropriate support plan for your daughter.

It is important to remember that your daughter may not need the support of an inclusion support assistant. But you can be reassured that the supports she needs to attend and take part in school will be available for her under the new model. This will include trained class and special education teachers. These teachers will be able to access advice and support from an occupational therapist or behaviour practitioner if your daughter needs help in these areas.

The important thing is to sit down and discuss your daughter's additional care needs openly on enrolment so that a plan can be put in place, if needed.

3. My child is very anxious and can become really upset in school. His behaviour can be very challenging as a result. How will school principals and teachers be able to make decisions about my child's needs?

Principals and teachers are professionals who are trained to identify children's needs in schools. Through normal class work and general class interaction, teachers are able to identify the students who are in need of additional support. They make good decisions everyday about how these needs should be met. They are the experts at supporting children in the school situation.

In the case of children who have complex emotional or behavioural needs, principals and teachers will get assistance from the NCSE Support Service or from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

The amount of additional support provided will vary from student to student. The intention is always that students with the greatest level of need are provided with the greatest level of support and that support addresses the student's identified learning needs.

NEPS has developed a system to help all schools to identify and support children with special educational needs. This system is known as the NEPS Continuum of Support and it works at three different levels:

- classroom level (support for all students) where the main person involved is the class/subject teacher,
- school support level (support for some students) where additional support teachers are involved, and
- school support plus level (support for a few) where children with more complex learning needs may see a NEPS psychologist and have an individualised programme in place.

Parents can learn more about this system on the NEPS website at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS-/NEPS-Model-of-Service.html>.

The DES will also be developing guidelines as part of the new school inclusion model.

4. My child currently has an SNA – what will happen now?

If your child continues to need support from an SNA then he/she will get that support. The person providing the support will now be called an inclusion support assistant. We think this is a better name because it explains that the support is about making sure that your child is included and can take part in school.

The difference is that inclusion support assistants will now be able to access general and tailored training so you can be reassured that your child's additional care needs can be met well. In addition, the school will be able to access expert advice and training from the NCSE Support Service in the event that additional expertise is required.

5. What happens if my son (who currently has SNA support) moves to another school in the middle of the year?

Your son's needs will be assessed by his new school to see what supports he now needs. Sometimes children need more support for a while when they move to a new school, for example, where they are moving from a special to a mainstream school. It can take a little while to get used to the greater number of students or more crowded play-grounds etc.

In other situations, children can need less support when they move school because the environment of the new school might be easier for them to manage. For example, the school might have wider corridors so it is easier for a wheel-chair user to get around or there may be fewer students in the school so the child is not so overwhelmed at break-times and so on.

In any case, you can be assured that if your son needs support it will be available to him in his new school.

6. My child was not approved SNA support because she doesn't have a diagnosis of disability. Will she qualify for support under the new arrangements?

This is one of the key improvements of the new model. Under the new model, your child's school will make the decision about whether she needs support and the level and type of support she needs.

If your child needs assistance to attend and take part in school, she will be able to avail of this support in school. She will no longer need to have a diagnosis of disability.

7. Is a new system being put in place to deliver therapies to children?

Yes. A new in-school therapy service is being put in place to deliver therapy supports to children in the school situation. This will enable a responsive service to be put in place in line with student's needs.

Many students have therapy needs which can be met through programmes delivered to the whole class. Some students may have need for targeted support, for example, in smaller groups. Other students require more intensive, clinical supports from multidisciplinary teams.

The School Inclusion Model, when fully implemented, will allow for the right support to be provided to students.

The NCSE is working with the Departments of Health, Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs and the HSE on the development of an in-school demonstration project – due to start in the 2018/19 school year in one region.

8. Will all children with special needs receive therapy support in school?

Not all children need therapy support. When the School Inclusion Model is fully implemented, it is envisaged that most students requiring therapy support will have services available to them in school.

Some students may have very complex needs, requiring support from multi-disciplinary HSE clinical teams, psychiatrists, physiotherapists, paediatricians etc. Sometimes it is better that these services are provided away from school – however detailed planning has started on how in-school and clinic-based services will be delivered.

9. My child currently receives OT in the local day care centre, will this support remain available?

It very much depends on the intervention your child needs. Detailed planning is required to scope the best way to deliver services and this has already started as part of the development of the in-school demonstration project. There are no plans to reduce the level of support for children currently in receipt of clinical services.

10. What will the new regional support team do for my child who has a learning disability?

The new regional support team will assist your child to be included in school. It will do this by providing training to his/her teachers and inclusion support assistants. It will also offer in-school support focussed on including children with additional care needs.

The NCSE intends to develop 10 fully staffed regional support teams. These teams will have specialist teachers, SENOs, behaviour practitioners, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. The teams will work with NEPS psychologists to provide training and support for parents and teachers.

11. Will the NCSE's proposals make any difference to inclusion support assistants' training or qualifications to work with students with additional care needs?

Yes, for the first time a national training programme will be funded for inclusion support assistants. In addition there will be joint training for teachers, parents and inclusion support assistants that is tailored to the specific needs of children being supported in school. So, for example, if a child has a tracheostomy or requires catheterisation, there will be training provided that is tailored to that child's particular needs.

In addition, we have recommended that the entry-level requirement for inclusion support assistants should be raised from level 3 to level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

12. Are these changes just intended to bring about savings in the Exchequer?

No. The NCSE has not recommended any reduction in the number of SNAs nor were we asked to. Our review is totally focussed on the supports that should be in place for students with additional care needs in order to bring about better outcomes for them.

That is what we were asked to do....and that is what our recommendations are designed to bring about.

