

ncse

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society?



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The Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, T.D. has asked the NCSE to advise on how best to educate students who currently enrol in special schools and classes.

In Ireland:

- ▶ 98 percent of students are educated in mainstream classes.
- ▶ One percent are educated in special classes in mainstream schools.
- ▶ A further one percent (around 8,000) students are educated in special schools.

Students' in special schools and classes tend to be those with more complex learning and care needs. Class groups in these settings have smaller numbers to assist the school in meeting these needs.

Over the last decade much has changed in the Irish educational landscape:

Government expenditure on special education has greatly increased and more students than ever before now avail of special education services. There have also been improvements in the wider system of supports.

Ireland has new international obligations since its ratification, in 2018, of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 24 of this convention requires us to ensure that all children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. The UN Committee's position is that having separate special schools and classes – as we do in Ireland – is not compatible with the Convention.



In preparing our progress report we were told:

Schools in some more remote areas are already fully inclusive because there are no special schools or classes close enough for students to attend.

Notwithstanding this, many groups supported having special schools and classes as an option because they felt that mainstream classes can be too challenging for students with complex needs. Mainstream teachers reported they don't have the skills to include these students, especially around challenging behaviours.

Other groups thought that ideally all students could, and perhaps should, be educated together in mainstream schools but found it difficult to imagine how students with the most complex medical, behavioural and intellectual difficulties could be included in mainstream schools.

There was consensus that currently the education system isn't ready to educate all students together. Concern was expressed that greater inclusion could result in some students being included in name only.

Other groups expressed concern that full inclusion could have a negative impact on the education of students who do not have a disability.

Many groups reported significant flaws in the current system for example:

Many students travel long distances to special schools and classes and such journeys can have a significant impact on a student's capacity to learn. These students lose connection to their local communities and we don't have the research evidence to be confident that they are getting improved outcomes as a result.

Many groups were concerned that educating a student in special schools and classes could have life-long negative consequences. All young children learn from each other and this is an important part of their development. Some very young children are placed in special schools and classes before they have any opportunity to learn alongside their peers without special educational needs. Once a child is placed in a special setting, they most likely remain there as it appears that placements are seldom, if ever reviewed.

Many principals and teachers report their special classes are working extremely well but others report they find it very difficult to organise and manage their classes. Equally principals of special schools report they are struggling to get teachers with the necessary skills and experience.

All report the lack of even the most basic therapy supports necessary to support students – particularly those with challenging behaviours. Some special schools are accommodated in old buildings unsuited to the education of students with complex needs.

Overseas we saw fully inclusive schools

We travelled to New Brunswick, Canada to see how an education system without special schools or classes supports its students. We also visited schools in Portugal as an example of a country moving towards greater compliance with the UN Convention.

In both countries all students are enrolled in a mainstream class in their local schools - although this doesn't mean that they spend all day every day in that class.

In both countries we saw how:

- ▶ It is natural and fully accepted for all students to learn together in their local schools. This is seen as a moral imperative and fundamental to building inclusive societies.
- ▶ Inclusion is intentionally planned. High standards are set for all students and both students with and without special educational needs are learning well and achieving good outcomes from school.



- ▶ Strong leadership is central to successful and meaningful inclusion for all.
- ▶ Students receive additional support where necessary - sometimes through in-class support and sometimes through withdrawal.
- ▶ Teachers are confident in their ability to meet the needs of all students and don't appear to experience the same levels of stress and anxiety as some teachers reported in Ireland.
- ▶ Classrooms are organised in a highly flexible manner with both students and teachers using technology to facilitate learning.
- ▶ A whole school approach to finding solutions is promoted.
- ▶ Teachers supported by other teachers and by external school support teams consisting of psychologists, speech and language therapists, OTs and so on...and by external health funded clinical teams, as required.

Where to from here?

Given what we have learned to date and given our commitments under the UNCRPD, we now believe it is time to extend our engagement with parents, students, people with disabilities, educators and other educational partners and stakeholders.

We want to seek your views on:

How can we best move forward in the education of students currently being educated in special schools and classes?

Following this extended consultation we will finalise our advice for submission to the Minister by end June 2020.

Teaching to diversity



