

IPPN Opening Statement

Autism Committee

4th October 2022

IPPN is the Irish Primary Principals' Network, the professional body for principals and deputy principal of almost 3,250 primary schools. We welcome this opportunity to discuss with the Committee the aims as well as the challenges of inclusion of children with Autism in primary schools.

In its widest sense, inclusive education aims to enable participation, raise achievement, support well-being and create a sense of belonging for all learners, including those with additional needs and those who are most vulnerable to exclusion. **Special needs are either met or they are not and, if not, there is a consequential impact not only on the child with special needs but also on the other children in the class.**

IPPN recognises the current pressure within the system in terms of a shortage of places for children with complex additional needs in special classes and in special schools in Dublin. **We fully support the principle of ensuring equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners**, alongside their siblings and friends in the local area in which they live. **This inclusion must be planned, supported and fully resourced.** The lack of proper and timely planning, consultation and due diligence to ascertain what actual capacity exists within the schools to facilitate the opening of special classes, and the extent to which such capacity is suitable to meet the varied needs of a special class has a severe impact on children and their families. **The current situation has resulted in children with additional needs being 'bussed' from their local area**, often right past their local school that their siblings and friends attend, to schools that may be many miles away from their home. This is untenable.

Under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998, the Minister now has the power to direct schools to make additional special education provision available and ensure sufficient places

are provided. It must be recognised that **a requirement to exercise those powers means that the system has already failed to adequately prepare for the placement of children with complex additional needs into schools alongside their peers.** The amendments to the legislation passed by the Cabinet in June merely sought to resolve an urgent issue that was of the system's own making. It lacks the vision required to prevent the situation recurring and does not ensure equity of access to their local school by all children.

IPPN encourages all schools to undertake to open a special class if/when an application is received on behalf of a child within their catchment area who has a recommendation for placement in a special class. The reduced timeframe for the Admissions process required under legislation does not afford sufficient time for the planning, support and resourcing to be undertaken that is required to facilitate the placement of children with complex additional needs in their local national school. This was raised by IPPN as an issue at the time the legislation was enacted.

We believe that **an amendment to the legislation to allow schools to receive advance applications on behalf of children who have a recommendation for placement in a special class or school - 24 months in advance of their school start date - would alleviate this difficulty.** This extended period **would allow the school**, in consultation with the SENO and parents, **to address what needs to be put in place to ensure the child's access to quality inclusive education.** It would **provide certainty to their parents about school placement**, would **obviate the need to invoke Section 37A** and, most importantly, would ensure that children with complex additional needs will be able to attend the same local national school as their brother or sister, and their friends. Finally, it would **eliminate the need for children to be 'bussed' to schools outside their catchment area**, and removes any barriers to providing places for children locally. This would consequently remove the need for the many taxis crossing our cities and towns, costing the taxpayer an inordinate amount of money when the local school is nearer.

At the heart of the issues we hear about from our members is **a need to differentiate between high incidence special needs and more complex low incidence special needs** and how such needs are planned for, supported and resourced. Adopting the same approach to both is problematic and incompatible with the differing challenges they present.

If the level of resources made available within the system are dictated by budgetary constraints, then it cannot be claimed that special education educational needs are fully met. It can merely be asserted that special educational need is met only to the level allowed by the budget allocated for it.

IPPN accepts that the task of accurately determining the level of low incidence, complex special need in schools is challenging. However, it is clear that **school leaders have significant misgivings about the accuracy of their schools' complex needs' profiles**, the information vacuum that exists as to how those profiles are determined and the system's inability to respond quickly to increased need.

I'll hand over to my colleague Caroline Quinn, who led a school with several special classes and has significant experience in relation to supporting children with Autism and their families.

Children with low incidence complex needs generally fall into 3 categories:

- those whose needs have been clearly identified and whose transition to school is anticipated, planned for and resourced
- those whose needs may have been identified but have not been flagged to the school and accordingly have not been planned for and resourced
- those whose needs emerge over a period of time and could not have been planned for and resourced.

The adequacy of a school's 'quantum of resources' is compromised largely, but not exclusively, as a result of children presenting in the school, whose needs have not been flagged to the school or children with identified complex needs who are not linked in with a disability team.

Notwithstanding the excellent work of public health nurses, GPs, early intervention teams and early childhood educators, **it is not uncommon for children to present in school with clearly identifiable complex needs that have not been flagged in advance to the school.** Parents may not have identified their child as having complex needs and may not have engaged with services or they may have been fearful that flagging their child as having complex needs would in some way have compromised the school place.

Either way, when such circumstances arise, **it can have a profoundly negative impact on the experience and learning of the child and a consequential impact on the experience and learning of the other children in the class.**

It is crucial that the system is agile enough to respond quickly to an emerging need, so as not to unnecessarily or unduly compromise the school's ability to adequately meet and respond to that need. This is not currently the case.

Most children with low incidence complex needs can thrive in a mainstream class setting or in a special class in a mainstream school if

- **their needs have been identified to the school in a timely manner**
- **there is sufficient time to plan for and put in place the supports that the children require**
- **the school's allocation of supports (teaching, special needs assistance, technology, furniture, building modifications, etc.) is adequate.**

In summary, there is **a number of key issues** that need to be addressed, including:

1. **Adequate resources and funding**, which the committee is likely to already be familiar with, but which includes building projects to add capacity, classroom furniture and equipment to meet the children's needs, staff and Board training in relation to supporting children with Autism

2. The **low incidence complex needs' profile of a school** needs to be considered as a **separate entity to high incidence needs**
3. The **exceptional review process**, by which schools can seek to have the accuracy of their SNA allocations considered, is unwieldy and slow in responding to emerging need. IPPN notes the "Targeted Review" process that is referred to in circular 0035/2022 and supports its piloting as a matter of urgency.
4. SENOs have a crucial role to play in ensuring that children, particularly those with low incidence complex needs, are adequately resourced and supported in schools. There is an **insufficient number of SENOs within the system**, which has significant knock-on effects. On average, each SENO had between 60 and 70 schools on their caseload. Schools in specific areas do not have a SENO and have access only to a "reporting" or "facilitating" SENO.
5. IPPN **acknowledges the increase in funding announced in yesterday's budget** in relation to spending on Special Education and in particular the extra 370 special classes to be opened, 234 at primary level, as well as the extra SENOS to be recruited. However, for it to work, we need all wraparound services to be put in place in tandem.
6. Where the resources allocated to a school are not sufficient to meet the needs, it makes no sense that the parent would **appeal the allocation of resources to the school leader** who has had no input to the level resources allocated to the school. It is unfair both to the parent and to the school leader and needs to be addressed.
7. **The pilot School Inclusion Model has merit with the access to additional assistance, such as behavioural support, added psychological support and therapy services.** There is **significant doubt as to whether such a model can be delivered countrywide given the dearth of such qualified professionals**, as evidenced by the pilot project in CH07 having recruited only 12 of the required 31 therapists. This is an issue both in terms of recruitment and substitution for sick leave, maternity leave etc., which adds to the time burden for school leaders in accessing supports for children in their schools.