



Special Schools

IPPN Position Paper

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1 BACKGROUND

IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official *Education Partner*, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

2 CONTEXT

The workload and responsibilities of a Special School Principal are at such a level of intensity, breadth and complexity that challenges the leadership function in such a way that a different approach from the decision-makers at all levels is now required. Principals of Special School feel very strongly that they lack a voice at the level that important decisions are being made yet they are charged with the responsibilities associated with the most complex, vulnerable group within the educational sector – a group that the system cannot support anywhere else.

Principals of Special School are now finding it impossible to meet the demands that are placed on them - to provide students with access to an educational placement in an equal and fair learning environment which is safe and inclusive. More and more principals are finding that they cannot meet the requirements of the Education Act, the Education and Welfare Act and the Health and Safety Act. This position paper sets out to understand why this is the case and what can be done to ameliorate the situation for the pupils, staff and principals of Special Schools. See Appendix 1 for Special School statistics.

3 THE ISSUE

The following are some of the reasons why Special Schools are currently struggling to provide adequately for all of the needs of their pupils. This is not an exhaustive list, however it sets out the most critical issues that need to be addressed.

3.1 SPECIAL SCHOOLS MANAGE AND LEAD COHORTS OF LARGE VOLUMES OF STAFF

Principals of Special Schools manage full-time and part-time primary and secondary teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), transport escorts, part-time secretaries, caretakers and cleaners - all of whom report only to the Principal. This is further exacerbated by the loss of middle leadership 'posts of responsibility' due to the moratorium, leaving Principals with very few staff members to whom they can effectively delegate. *Note:* The Principal is remunerated according to the number of mainstream class teachers, yet is managing up five or six times that number of overall staff. The daily HR issues associated with managing this volume of staff are taking up an inordinate amount of time. With regard to bus escorts and ancillary staff, Special School Principals are acting as wage clerks, tax consultants and counsellors in addition to managing the HR issues associated with dignity at work, underperformance, recruitment processes, de-briefing and assault management, provision of substitute cover and roster management. See Appendix 2 for examples of overall staff numbers in special schools.

3.2 DEALING WITH VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR

Students in Special Schools, many of whom are up to 18 years old, can present with dangerous behaviours requiring a very specific response from staff who are not supported with guidance and training from the DES. These staff are left with no option but to apply restrictive practices and sometimes restraint. In doing this, they leave themselves vulnerable to losing their jobs, their status and their reputations whilst trying to exercise their duty of care to keep others and themselves safe in school. These incidents are not occasional - there can be many incidents in a single day requiring an immediate, hands on response from the Principal who often is the only person 'free' from teaching duties who can be there to help. H/she must then spend many hours ensuring that the correct post-incident actions take place to safeguard all involved.

3.3 HEALTH AND SAFETY IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Whilst every school presents health and safety challenges, the duty of care in a Special School far exceeds that of any other school due the high risk factors involved when working with pupils with significant cognitive impairments. Principals are constantly on high alert and assessing risk at a level of intensity and frequency not found in most regular schools.

The specific health and safety issues in question include:

- Sourcing and co-ordinating specific training and providing resources for staff in the areas of feeding, toileting, emergency medical responses, disability and mobility aids, administration of medication, monitoring chronic health conditions including the increased risk of serious infections due to intimate care needs etc. *Note:* most special schools do not have nursing support...
- Child protection – due to the vulnerability of the students attending special schools, Principals must be especially vigilant regarding child protection. This involves significant additional workload and an immediate response from the Principal.

- Managing high risk behaviours such as absconding, climbing, catching fingers in doors, tripping, falling, slipping, cutting themselves etc.
- Providing for and funding vaccination programmes from capitation

3.4 PUPIL TEACHER RATIO

The 1993 Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report was a radical intervention at the time and has shaped the Special Schools sector for much of the past 25 years. It is now completely out of date and therefore the basis on which Special Schools are resourced must be revisited as soon as possible. This is arguably the most essential change that can occur for Special Schools going forward. The Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTRs) listed are totally out of date with the reality of the complexity of the needs of the pupils now enrolled in our schools. Schools for children with severe and profound intellectual and physical disabilities in particular are in crisis. Almost all pupils attending special schools now have very complex needs. Those who can manage in mainstream are generally catered for in special classes. Therefore, special schools now accommodate the most complex cases. They must not be expected to manage PTRs that are equal to those that exist in special classes in mainstream schools.

3.5 TRANSPORT ESCORT SYSTEM

Most Special Schools find themselves managing a Transport Escort system outside of school hours, involving the employment of up to 30 part-time escorts. This requires their attention from 7.30 am until 4.30pm each school day (with no remuneration for this work whatsoever). See Appendix 3 for example responsibilities in relation to travel in special schools.

3.6 WORKING WITH MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAMS AND VISITING PROFESSIONALS

Some Special Schools have little or no access to essential clinical services such as psychology, SLT, OT, Physio, Social Work etc. Pupils are enrolled in schools with a justifiable parental expectation that such services will be available to them. It is unthinkable that pupils with highly complex intellectual, medical and emotional needs cannot access these services easily in school.

The co-ordination of the professionals in multi-disciplinary teams usually falls to the Principal, who must manage parental expectations, organise work space, and manage resources and meetings for each pupil in the school.

The new Progressing Disability Service by the HSE will have far-reaching implications for Special Schools. Those who have had a school-based service up to now will only have access to a community-based service. This will inevitably decrease the service to the pupils in special schools and increase the work-load of the principals.

3.7 DEALING WITH MEDICAL NEEDS

Many pupils attending Special Schools present with complex medical conditions that require nursing care. Most special schools do not have any nursing support and those that do are in constant fear of the service being withdrawn. Many principals are trying to manage complex medical conditions with no medical support whatsoever. This is not safe and a high stressor for Principals. The need to arrange for, fund and provide vaccinations is now becoming a major issue as the traditional service providers have withdrawn this service from schools which had heretofore been provided free.

3.8 JUNIOR CYCLE/LEAVING CERT APPLIED

Many Special Schools are also Secondary Schools and offer Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert programmes in addition to an expectation that all primary programmes are provided for those who need them. Teachers are writing their own programmes and assessing pupils' work with no protected time,

resources or reward whilst also having full-time teaching duties. The Principal is often the only person available in the school to co-ordinate this work.

3.9 SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Some buildings are wholly unsuitable for their purpose with little or no disabled toilet facilities, specialist areas to manage personal care issues, safe play areas, space to accommodate specialist subject teachers, therapy areas or office accommodation for therapists and medical staff. Special school buildings are in a constant state of alteration, both as a result of high 'wear and tear' and the need to constantly evaluate the environment in order to prevent/reduce the risks associated with challenging behaviours and health and safety. Principals are always project managing and coordinating various building projects. The management and maintenance of space and accommodation in Special Schools to facilitate the needs of the large volumes of persons using the building is a full-time job in itself.

3.10 SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

The recruitment of Board Members (especially skilled Chairpersons) is a major challenge for Special Schools. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, special schools do not have a strong local base due to the diversity of locations of pupils. Pupils attend from up to 40 miles from the school. Secondly, the complexity of the issues that are associated with Special Schools are even more daunting than those facing mainstream and this 'scares' potential candidates.

3.11 TRANSFER FROM MAINSTREAM TO SPECIAL SCHOOLS

An issue that possibly has more implications for schools supporting pupils with 'mild' general learning difficulties is that pupils who wish to transfer from mainstream schools to avail of second-level programmes in Special Schools may never have been assessed. They may not have met the criteria in mainstream schools to warrant using one of the very few such assessments available to schools annually. In order to be considered for enrolment, they must have an assessment, therefore parents are in the position of having to fund private assessments to access their preferred Special School.

3.12 DES AND OTHER INITIATIVES

Principals of special schools have expressed their deep frustration that new programmes, initiatives and circulars being issued by the DES are introduced without giving any consideration to how they will impact on special schools. Typical of this are the new proposed Droichead and Cosán programmes, Teaching Council Directives with regard to qualifications of Regulation 3 teachers, recruitment from the panel, and the allocation of teachers and so on. Some of these initiatives have far-reaching consequences for special schools and they deserve to be involved at an early stage.

3.13 COMPLEX EMOTIONAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

A very small cohort of special schools such as St Kevin's in Cork are catering for pupils who cannot be accommodated in mainstream schools due to their complex severe emotional and socio-economic difficulties. These schools do not even have access to a SENO and therefore no access to the services of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). This means that they do not qualify for basic teaching and SNA resources for extremely vulnerable pupils.

3.14 JULY PROVISION

Some Special Schools are expected to provide July Provision to pupils. Most teachers and SNAs no longer wish to work in the school during the month of July and cannot be compelled to do so. This means that Principals find themselves recruiting a full cohort of staff for 2-4 weeks in July. This has now become unsustainable for a wide variety of reasons – Garda vetting, lack of interest among staff, health and safety, no training and so on.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the issues described above, IPPN believes that implementing the following recommendations will go a long way to addressing them and to meeting the requirements of the various Acts of legislation that underpin the work of Special Schools.

1. All Special School principals should be administrative i.e. released from full-time teaching duties.
2. All Special School Deputy Principals should be administrative when the school reaches 6 classroom teachers. All other Deputies should have a number of 'administration days' available to them on a pro-rata basis.
3. **All staff** should be included in calculating Principals' and Deputy Principals' allowances per DES scales. In Northern Ireland, all staff except cleaner/caretaker are included for allowances. This should transfer to all primary schools.
4. In order to manage their schools, Principals need to have adequate qualified administrative staff such as a school administrator and teachers to whom they can delegate effectively and fairly.
5. Schools managing pupils with extreme and violent behaviours require additional resources to manage these situations. They require home/school liaison officers, resource teachers and other supports such as behaviour therapists and SNAs to ensure such situations are managed effectively and according to best practices. Training and guidance is required as a matter of urgency.
6. A review of Special Schools resourcing must be fast-tracked i.e. a new 'SERC report' is required. This review must acknowledge that pupils with severe challenging behaviours and those with high medical needs need to be accommodated in much smaller class groupings and be allocated appropriate teaching and SNA support.
7. The management of escort supports in each special school requires dedicated resources, including out-of-hours work. Some of this work could be centralised across special schools in a catchment area e.g. shared training, however most of the work is specific to each school and the needs of individual pupils and their families.
8. The number and complexity of health and safety risks, including the risks around child protection, require that additional resources be made available to special schools. This could be delivered through additional middle management with specific responsibility for health and safety or a greatly improved PTR which would enable more teachers to take on responsibility for H&S across the school. IPPN recommend a move to 4:1, down from 6:1 as in SERC report.
9. Skilled nursing support is required in each special school to appropriately manage pupils' medical conditions and provide support to all staff who are supporting children with complex medical needs.
10. Ensure every special school has access to essential clinical services such as psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Social Work and so on.
11. Ensure that the HSE Progressing Disability Service does not reduce the resources and access available to pupils in special schools.
12. Dedicated post-primary curriculum supports are required to ensure that pupils undertaking Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes in special schools can avail of the highest possible standards

of education. It is not feasible or fair to ask teachers and principals who are not themselves trained in post-primary curricula to undertake this work.

13. Skilled professionals should be allocated to plan, manage and oversee school building work, whether maintenance, repair or new projects. Such resources could be shared across multiple special schools.
14. A review of school governance structures across special schools is required to ensure that the appropriate skills are available to all schools and that these schools are adequately governed.
15. Increased access to assessments is required to ensure that all children who require access to a special school, or special needs supports, can do so.
16. Include an assessment of the specific impact on special schools in all discussions around education sector change. Involving principals of special schools early would avoid a lot of avoidable knock-on effects across hundreds of schools, impacting thousands of pupils and teachers.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In summary, special schools are now finding it impossible to meet the demands that are placed on them to provide their students with access to an educational placement in an equal and fair learning environment which is safe and inclusive. To ensure that these schools can fully meet the requirements of the Education Act, The Education and Welfare Act and the Health and Safety Act requires both political commitment and adequate resources. Implementing the above recommendations would go a long way to ensuring that *all* pupils have equal access to a high quality education.