

Special Class Provision

Underlying Assumptions/Principles

1. Inclusive education is understood in its widest sense with the goal of enabling participation, raising achievement, supporting well-being and creating a sense of belonging for all learners, including those most vulnerable to exclusion.
2. IPPN supports the principle of ensuring effective, equal access to quality, inclusive education for all learners.
3. Prioritising access to inclusive education in an appropriate setting for one cohort of children with additional needs, in such a way that it compromises access for another cohort of children with additional needs to inclusive education in an appropriate setting, is not equitable.
4. This applies equally to special class and special school provision.
5. With specific reference to the opening of special classes, all schools have a responsibility in this regard.
6. Such inclusion is planned for, supported and adequately resourced by all relevant services in accordance with the actual level of need that presents within the system.
7. If that is the case, there is no reason why any child who meets the criteria for placement in a special class cannot attend the same national school as their brother or sister
8. There has been significant increased expenditure in recent years in the area of special education.
9. The numbers of children presenting with additional needs who meet the criteria for placement have increased significantly in recent years and will continue to do so in the coming years.
10. The recruitment of additional SENOs/Team Managers will have a consequential positive impact on manageable caseloads and enhanced engagement and relationships with schools.
11. School staff will receive adequate training both in challenging behaviour and in effective strategies for planning, teaching and assessment in a timely manner to better ensure they have the expertise to meet the needs of children in special class setting
12. Special class settings will be in keeping with DE technical guidelines and specifications.

Acknowledgement

IPPN acknowledges the considerable commitment and efforts of all parties (the Special Education section of the DE, the NCSE, Patrons, school leaders and Boards of Management) to ensure sufficient capacity exists within schools to accommodate all children who require placement in a special class. The fact that this has been achieved, in the main, at an earlier juncture than in previous years is testament to the shared ambition to find solutions that best serve the interests of these children and their families.

Overview

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.

The inadequacy of the current legislation came sharply into focus in June 2022, when a shortage of school places in special classes and special schools in Dublin was made a subject of media attention. It is IPPN's belief that this shortage of places, and the similar issues that have arisen in subsequent years, are due, in no small part, to a lack of time to undertake the necessary planning, consultation and due diligence, to ascertain what actual capacity exists within 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. The reduced timeframe for Admissions is a significant contributory factor.

The stipulations of Circular 0080/2024 to support forward planning for Special Education provision have made a positive difference. In particular, the requirement of parents to notify the NCSE by 1st February of their child's need for placement in a special class has assisted the process of identifying and planning for the provision of additional special class and special school capacity.

IPPN recognises the legal obligation of schools to share data on applications for admission to special classes or special schools with the NCSE, when requested to do so. IPPN further recognises that when *“devising admission policies, schools are required to adhere to legal requirements, to guidelines developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and to circulars issued by the Department of Education on provision for children and young people with special educational needs”*.

Perspectives of School Leaders

With specific reference to the process of establishing new special classes for 2025/26, in areas where demand exceeded capacity, the following perspectives emerged from our engagement with school leaders

- There was a sense that expedience was a determining factor in the identification of schools who were approached to open special classes. These were schools who had an available space/room and/or had a teacher or teachers to be redeployed, even though they may already have opened special classes previously and had no applications from children in their catchment area for placement in a special class.
- There was a sense that other schools were avoiding their responsibilities, particularly schools who had not previously opened a special class despite the fact that there were children awaiting placement in a special class who lived within the catchment areas of those schools.

- There was a sense that some of the spaces/rooms that had been identified as being able to accommodate a special class were wholly unsuitable and would compromise the quality of provision to children in those classes.
- There was a concern that schools were being asked to prioritise external applicants for places in special classes over children already enrolled in the school who met the criteria for placement in the special class.
- Concern was also expressed that schools were being asked to accommodate more than 6 pupils in a special class for children with autism spectrum disorders.
- There is a sense that applications made for support, in particular with challenging behaviours, can be very slow to process and result in school staff struggling to manage pupils in special classes and special schools.
- There is a concern about a lack of understanding by parents of the school system and how it works, resulting in parents thinking that the only way to get specific resources for their children is through diagnosis and special provision putting more pressure on the system.
- School leaders feel that a missing piece of the jigsaw is being without NEPS support in the school and a poor Scapa system leaving them without assessments and psychological support for pupils.

Proposals/Recommendations

1. Amend the Admissions' legislation to allow schools to receive applications on behalf of children who have a recommendation for placement in a special class or school, up to 24 months in advance of their school start date. The extended period that would be afforded by an earlier application would allow the school, in consultation with the SENO, to address what needs to be put in place to ensure the child's access to quality inclusive education. It would provide the parents of such children with certainty about school placement and would obviate the necessity for Section 37A powers to be invoked.
2. Until such time as the legislation is amended, and given that most schools complete their enrolment for the following school year during the first term, it would be preferable if parents notified the NCSE of their child's need for placement in a special class by 1st November, or as soon as possible thereafter.
3. Schools should ensure that their Admissions policies adhere to legal requirements, to guidelines developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and to circulars issued by the Department of Education on provision for children and young people with special educational needs.
4. All places in special classes should be filled in accordance with the admissions policy of the school, subject to that policy being compliant with the relevant legislation.
5. Where it is not possible for an individual school to open a full special class within the timeframe set out by NCSE, supports should be provided to enable the school to enrol the children using an enhanced emergency SET allocation to facilitate the child's attendance, until the special class can be opened. In this way, every school would provide for the children requiring placement in a special class in their locality.

6. School staff will receive adequate training both in challenging behaviour and in effective strategies for planning, teaching and assessment in a timely manner to better ensure they have the expertise to meet the needs of children in special class setting.
7. Ensure all rooms that are designated for use as special classes can be upgraded to ensure they are in keeping with the technical guidance and specifications for such accommodation.