

25th February 2012

Dear Members,

Last Saturday I was invited to IMPACT Special Needs Assistants Annual Delegate Conference as guest speaker in my capacity as Chairperson of the Special Needs Parents Association and also as a parent of a child with multiple disabilities. The two other guest speakers were John Coughlan from Disability Aid Abroad and Deputy Aodhain O' Riordain representing the Government. Guests at the conference included representatives from the educational management bodies in Ireland. The title of the conference was 'Ag Obair Le Cheile', Working Together.

The Chairperson of the Special Needs Assistants Branch of IMPACT Joan Crohan in her opening address to the SNA delegates stated that,

"This service is important to us, but it is precious to the children we support and a life line to their families. We have demonstrated our commitment throughout the talks and the fact that there are representatives from management bodies present here today is evidence of their belief in what we are trying to achieve and it demonstrates to us their commitment to working together to bring about the best possible outcome for our children with special needs. For us to make this service all that it could be and should be we do need to commit to working together. We need to listen but also to be heard. We value the relationship we have with the Special Needs Parents Association.....We have supported each other in the last year and we look forward to fostering the relationship between SNPA and IMPACT and working closely together in the future. In the Croke Park Agreement we committed to delivering a more efficient and effective service to children with special care needs. In order to achieve this aim we must all collaborate, we must work together."

Deputy O' Riordain spoke about the recent reversal in cuts in DEIS schools and how admittedly, the Dept. of Education had made the wrong decisions. While the protection of the teaching posts has been addressed, due to budgetary constraints, the deficit in funding must now be addressed by other means and this has led to a further cut in schools capitation grants. This choice is unfortunately the lesser of two evils in order to protect the most vulnerable in the education system and in these times we have to prioritise those needs. The deputy also addressed delegates concerns that SNAs were devalued in some schools, not considered part of the "Team" and excluded from staff meetings, Individual Educational Planning meetings (IEPs) and from multi-disciplinary meetings. This was a worrying revelation by SNA members during the motions set down at the conference and a recurrent theme throughout the discussions that I had with SNAs that evening following the conference. Deputy O'Riordain emphasised that School Principals and teachers needed to value and respect SNAs more as an essential part of school staff who had a lot to contribute in the outcomes of children with special educational needs and that their time should not be used in a manner not fitting with their roles as SNAs as identified in the Value for Money Review on the SNA Scheme June 2011. These are areas that IMPACT have been working on and have reached an agreement and a Circular was issued last December to members in relation to SNA duties during non-contact time with students.

It was evident from the motions put forward for voting by SNA Delegates that they are passionate about improving the service for our children and seek further recognition and understanding for the role in which they work in especially amongst the teaching profession. In recognition of the integrity of the role of the SNA within the school community, they seek representation on the schools Board of Management alongside representatives of teaching staff, parents, patrons and independent members of the local community. SNAs are looking to secure support and access for further training to be able to provide a quality of service that children deserve. Prioritisation for provision of supports to children in junior infants in primary schools and 1st year in secondary schools will be raised with the NCSE. As a Branch, SNAs "would like to advocate for children with SEN, that they should not sustain any further cuts in support services. Investment in services to children with disabilities is vitally important for better outcomes and essential to better quality of life for those who are dependent on the state to provide the therapies and support services that are required"

My speech focussed on several of the prevalent issues raised by SNAs during the Conference and the main theme was on good communication and working together for the benefit of our children. Below are some excerpts from the speech;

"I am fully versed as I think so too are the general public, as to the passion exhibited by parents in their fight to access supports and services for their children. The reason why we fight so hard is that we have a vested interest in not just our child's future, but also our own as parents. We want every effort and intervention possible to maximise the potential of our children living independent lives as adults, so that we too can grow old with less worry about what will happen to them when we have passed on and no longer there to take care of them.....

Special Needs Assistants have an integral role to play in promoting and facilitating our children to develop independent skills. Of course, some children will forever have some level of dependency depending on their disability, but we must all strive to maximise the few independent skills that are achievable.

A child who has developed independent skills over time as a result of interventions and the work of an SNA, may no longer need that SNA to facilitate them, this can only be seen as a success as to the objectives of the service, despite it resulting in an SNA essentially working themselves out of a job. For the most part, parents view the reduction in supports (when not premature and due to lack of resources) as a positive sign in their child's development. But of course there are those that fear what can happen their child when an SNA is no longer there and this has to be acknowledged.....

Sometimes as parents, we can do too much for our children in the home setting and a good SNA should always know when it's appropriate to assist and when it's better to take a step back and encourage a child to do it for themselves, thus fostering independent skills. Whether you are a parent or an SNA, it is always important to give children the opportunity to try before stepping in, regardless of time constraints which can often be the main reason for adults to intervene. An adult saving time risk stealing a child's independence.

Working together with a common approach and goals should be a given. There is no other way that will best serve the needs of a child with special needs. Over the years I have had personal experience of what happens when people work together and communicate well and what happens when SNAs are excluded from a team approach.

Recommendations on the Continued Relevance of SNA Scheme in the VFM Review June 2011 stated that, "Individualised planning should be a feature of provision for all students with special educational needs. A team approach to the development, implementation and review of individualised planning should be adopted and where relevant a care dimension should be included in the planning"

Special Needs Assistants are a core part of the multi-disciplinary team whose common objective should be to maximise the potential of the child with special needs to achieve set, but realistic goals. These goals can be academic, but they can also refer to developing self-care and independent skills, such as taking on and off a coat or taking a book from a bag or pen from a pencil case, pulling up clothes after toileting or following a sequence of events to get ready for yard time. These might be seen as minor tasks by a casual onlooker, but for the parent who is most familiar with their child and an SNA who works with the child for all or a portion of the day, they can be mammoth tasks.

I have experienced cases where SNAs are excluded from any planning or multi-disciplinary team meetings to do with a particular child. The reasons cited tend to be that matters not pertinent to the SNA will be discussed. I beg to differ. There is very little discussed in multi-disciplinary team meetings that aren't pertaining to the role of an SNA carrying out his or her job effectively. There may however be items discussed where the input of an SNA is not required, however getting information first hand from therapists instead of via the teacher or principle, avoids misinterpretation and misinformation.

Special needs students are best served when school and home work together harmoniously. Students perform better. Teachers and parents are less frustrated and less stressed in a cooperative environment. Nonetheless, schools and parents are often in conflict. Frustration happens on all sides of the school and home relationship. Respectful communication, honesty, sympathetic listening, and straightforward responses about situations go a long ways toward creating good relationships between SNAs, teachers and parents.

Special needs students are also best served when government and educational bodies involve parents' organisations such as SNPA proactively as equal partners to have any prospect of success in relation to the management of SNA resources. Over the past few years, parents of pupils with special needs have felt increasingly disenfranchised from the processes and decisions made in relation to special education policy. This was primarily down to a lack of communication which is an area that we seek to address. The National Council for Special Education have also taken this on board and sought to address part of the problem by the recent publication of Information Booklet for Parents of Children with Special Educational Needs (www.ncse.ie) and overhauling the information on their website. SNPA has also made proposals to the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) with a view to doing something similar and address the deficit in correct information that has led to so much confusion and misinformation about the service and assessments.

Good communication is the key to all of us working together with one goal in mind, our children and meeting their needs, in order to maximise their potential to give them better opportunities as they grow towards adulthood"

Lorraine Dempsey

Chairperson

Special Needs Parents Association