

# **SNPA Oral Presentation to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education & Social Protection**

**18th November 2015**

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, I would like to express my thanks for the invitation to address the Committee today. The Special Needs Parents Association is a parent led voluntary organisation. In our written submission we have used feedback from individual parents, Inclusion Ireland Education Committee which I also Chair, the Irish National Council of ADHD Support Groups (INCADDS), the Dyslexia Association of Ireland, SSLI Parents Support Group and Dr. Alison Doyle of Caerus Education. We endeavour to highlight the multiple voices and opinions of parents and their personal perspectives on the difficulties that can arise for children with special educational needs at secondary schools but by no means limited to what is being presented today.

In terms of **legislation**, it has been eleven years since the passing of the EPSEN act. The current Program for Government contains a commitment to publish a plan to implement the EPSEN Act in full. As it has taken around 144 years to replace the Lunacy Act, perhaps us parents are being a bit too pushy about EPSEN but we would appreciate an indication of when all outstanding sections of the Act will be enacted. Two outstanding aspects of EPSEN that parents are focussed on are Individual Educational Plans and an Independent Appeals Office.

Parents would like to see a mandatory framework for IEPs being developed and implemented in ALL schools, for EVERY child with SEN.

While recent calls for an Ombudsman for Education (Deputy Daly) are justified, an Independent Appeals Office may negate the need for many complaints at Ombudsman level with the exception of complaints about Boards of Management which is an issue that should not be ignored by the Minister.

**Teacher Training** in SEN is the single biggest factor likely to increase outcomes for pupils. Parents want to see mandatory pre-service and in-service training for all teachers. Previous surveys and reviews by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland and the Governments own Task Force on Autism (2001) indicated a lack of knowledge and training for teachers in the area of SEN. Any barriers to

teachers accessing further training in the area of SEN and feeling competent to manage the variety of learning needs now presenting at second level must be addressed by the Department.

There is significant information available for schools on **Transition** planning from the Special Education Support Service but parents experiences of transitions are varied and depend on who co-ordinates this period. A smooth transition of information, equipment and assistive technology from primary to secondary level is essential for pupils and tight collaboration between health and education professionals is imperative around this time. Parents have complained that the recommended **assistive technology** is not always in place prior to the child starting second level and that cases where granted equipment is not transferrable from primary to secondary has caused difficulty for the pupil at the start of their school year.

I have written to the Department of Education in my capacity as Chairperson of Inclusion Ireland's Education Committee to call for an increase in the number of Educational Psychologists employed by the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) as the number of NEPS **assessments** available to schools is not sufficient to meet the demand. Secondary schools state a requirement of a psychology report no older than three years for enrolment and parents are directed to get an Assessment of Needs done or go privately. Parents should not be out of pocket in order to provide such reports and this issue is well documented.

On a positive note, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) recently announced that pupils preparing for third level will no longer need a report of three years or less and are introducing the concept of an Educational Impact Statement. Perhaps such a statement from primary school would be of more value in the absence of a psychologists report.

There are only a handful of mixed disability special classes at second level and while the number of classes for children with autism has increased, there are known black spots around the country despite demand and this is very frustrating for parents. We would like to see the NCSE be given additional powers to compel a school to open a special class where demand is documented.

There are a small number of **special classes** at primary level for Specific Speech and Language Impairment (SSLI) but there is no special class provision at secondary level for this condition which is life-long and enduring. There is also the issue of co-morbidities and designated special classes and special schools that currently don't meet the needs of children in their area.

We were quite surprised during consultation, at the number of parents indicating that access to resource teaching was timetable dependent on whether their child had an **exemption** from Irish and many parents questioned how much support their child was actually. We have provided a few real examples in our written submission to the committee. A suggestion of an oral Irish only exemption could be explored for pupils who would not have issues with the written language. It is also concerning that a **misuse of resource teaching hours** for other purposes has been reported recently in the media. The question has to be asked, if pupils are not receiving the support due to time tabling difficulties, where are those hours going and what are they being used for outside of student contact time?

Following an Ombudsman for Children's report in 2014, applications for **Examination Accommodations** that were unsuccessful in future years should now be given a reason by the Commission so that students know on what basis they should appeal. The final decision for exam accommodations needs to be made much earlier to avoid undue pressure on pupils and their parents.

In relation to **July Provision**, the scheme should be flexible enough to allow second level pupils to avail of the extended school year provision in June or August to allow time to prepare for the new school term which could be of greater academic benefit in preparing a pupil for the new term ahead. Teachers having to wait for payment until November each year discourages participation and finding tutors is getting more challenging.

One of the more serious issues that we would like to see addressed is **Restricted Access to School** whether voluntary or enforced. The NCSE and Department do not have the power to compel schools to enrol a pupil if the Board of Management refuses using their enrolment policy as a barrier.

We currently have no tracking of numbers of students with SEN who have had their school week reduced to a few hours daily or who following expulsion

have taken a section 29 appeal. Such lack of data is of serious concern as we cannot get to grips with the prevalence of the problem.

For pupils where such high levels of anxiety arising from their disabilities prevent them from attending school, Home Tuition should be offered in the interim despite a school place being available or accessed on occasion to avoid a widening of an educational gap between them and their peers. Some thought has to be given to the impact of such absences on subjects where there is a continuous assessment model as part of the Junior Certificate curriculum reform and a key worker should be put in place to co-ordinate efforts across education and health to implement a plan to get the pupil back to a full school day even where the shortened school days are enforced by the school. Someone has to take responsibility for pulling everyone together.

At present there is no legal obligation for a teacher or school to record the use of restraint or seclusion. As a consequence there is no data on the frequency of such practices or the impact this has on the child. There is no independent oversight of the use of **Seclusion and Restraint** in Irish schools and regardless of whether you agree or are opposed to the practice, this has to change.

As I said at the beginning, the issues at second level are by no means limited to what is being presented today and more may emerge during questions with my colleague Teresa Maher whose son has completed second level with significant disabilities so can also offer a personal perspective. It also has to be said that there are a lot of positive examples of pupils with special educational needs being supported to achieve their potential but as numbers increase year on year, our schools need to have more capacity to meet the demands placed by pupils with such wide ranging needs.

Thank You.