



**Special Needs Parents Association Briefing to Oireachtas Joint
Committee on Education & Social Protection
7th November 2012**

**Theme: A parental experience on the provision of special needs
education in Ireland**

The parental experience on the provision of special education in Ireland is varied and depends on a multitude of factors such as individual school settings, the diagnosis of the child, attitudes and experience of school staff & SENOs, level of support from external services and barriers to parental choice.

In 2009, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) sought the views of parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) for the first time on a systematic basis through a large scale survey. Almost 1,400 parents of children with special educational needs responded to the survey providing insights into their views and experiences of issues such as finding and accessing a school; getting their child's needs assessed; school policy and resources; relationships between parents and schools and parents and SENOs; and overall satisfaction with the support being given to their child.

However, the report also showed that "a substantial minority ranging between ten per cent and 20 per cent expressed dissatisfaction with certain elements of the provision" (1). In the main, these are the parents most likely to contact our Association for peer support. The Special Needs Parents Association does not have the resources to conduct such a comprehensive study, but through our daily interactions with parents, we have been able to identify the factors that both inhibit and support the successful inclusion of children with SEN and the impacts on their parents. What is very consistent with our anecdotal experiences of dealing with parent's queries and the findings of the report is that "The relationship between parents and schools played a central role in these positive experiences." (1)

Throughout this briefing, we have used parent's comments and actual experiences to highlight their voice and opinions and to give a brief insight into parent's personal perspectives and the difficulties that can arise when interfacing with the special education system.

1. Resourcing model. The special educational resource allocation system administrated by the NCSE under Department of Education policy is currently based on diagnosis. In particular, the level of resource hours allocated to a child by the NCSE is based purely on diagnosis and not arising need (Appendix 1. Sp Ed Circular 02/05)
(2).SNPA would like to see an alignment of the model of special education resource allocation with the needs-based approach proposed in the area of health resource allocation under the national implementation plan for 'Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People'.

"As a parent....it feels like unless your child has a label or fits into the right category, then they are just left there and forgotten about. Just because they are not under the remit of the NCSE, does not make their disability any less important or serious. Children are being diagnosed with GDD (Global Developmental Delay) by psychologists, but this 'label' doesn't seem to be recognised by the education system"

The basis for resourcing should remain the care (including therapeutic), educational and **social** needs such as behavioural support and communications needs. Not enough emphasis is made of the fact that the school and classroom are also social environments where social skills need to be developed and practiced. In the NCSE's consultative process this year, concerning an alternative resourcing model, the NCSE used the word "quantum" to describe the level of supports - suggesting a fixed amount? SNPA would prefer the use of the word 'continuum' to describe how resourcing is to be provided as a child's needs may change over the years and supports should be reviewed as a child moves through school and as capacity, hopefully, develops. It must also be recognised that needs may also increase over time, in some cases and also change in the middle of a school year. An expedient approach to meeting those needs is required.

2. Assessment of Need. There needs to be greater cooperation/integration at local level between the HSE assessment of need for pre-school going children and allocation of educational needs supports by the SENO. Into the future, a single pathway for assessing therapeutic, health, education and welfare needs & entitlements would be most welcome by parents and reduce the burden of paperwork, separate applications and the necessity to provide reports to several government bodies & departments which occupies parents time that would better be dedicated to meeting their child's needs on a day to day basis and reduce the well documented stress involved for the parent. SNPA would like to propose that a Cross Departmental Working Group be established to specifically look at the integration of assessments for the purpose of designing a single streamlined pathway for assessing a child's needs with a view to obtaining support services, educational resources and welfare supports from a singular assessment.

3. Integration in mainstream settings. SNPA would strongly recommend the introduction of classroom assistants to bridge the gap between teachers and SNAs. SNPA are of the view that the classroom assistant is the “missing piece of the jigsaw” with regard to the provision of an integrated educational service, particularly where mainstream schools are concerned. Collaborative engagement between classroom and support teachers is recognised as an essential prerequisite for developing inclusive learning environments. There appear to be many barriers to developing collaborative relationships in school. Schools’ preference for the withdrawal model of pupil support reduced opportunities for developing collaborative relationships through team teaching, for example. The parental experience is that there is doubt as to the levels of in-class support work being done, for a number of reasons to do with resourcing, space, and time and class sizes.

“I know that my child did great work with the resource teacher, but that was only for a half an hour or so every day. After that, it seemed that she was lost among the 28 others in her class without that extra help, to fend for herself and very little to show for it in the end, but a school book full of scribbles. We’ve no opted to send her to a special school where we know that she will receive more of an educational programme tailored for her needs for the whole day and not just a bit here and there for the sake of ‘Inclusion’ ”.

It is not surprising then, that The Value for Money Review of the SNA Scheme ⁽⁵⁾ identified that in some schools SNAs had been tasked with a number of educational support tasks where schools recognized the in-class support deficit. SNPA is of the opinion that Classroom Assistants are needed to promote the in-class support need. A Classroom Assistant would have more generalised responsibilities under the management of the Class Teacher. Across our European neighbours, different models of support are evident and the utilisation of both a Classroom Assistant & SNA with defined roles is something that SNPA is of the opinion, should be explored further. The utilization of Classroom Assistants should be seen in the context of other needed developments mentioned elsewhere in this briefing, notably the utilisation of the IEP and greater CPD in SEN for staff.

4. Transitions. There needs to be more focus on managing the transition phase between early intervention services/pre-school to primary, primary to post primary and post primary to third level education.

“It is generally accepted that this transition can be problematic on an educational level for many children, regardless of whether or not they have a special educational need. For children with SEN, it is likely that the academic and social prospects of changing schools could be even more daunting”. ⁽¹⁾

One way to improving transition would be to create linkages between the different levels by way of school partnerships. The NCSE, in its 2011 report *The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland* ⁽⁸⁾, recognises the importance of greater linkages between mainstream and special schools/classes. SNPA welcomes this recognition and would make the point that partnerships between schools would make transition planning more effective. Whether the effectiveness of partnerships would depend on the co-location of schools is open for discussion but there is no doubt, in the SNPA’s view, that partnerships would facilitate flexibility and interaction in terms of the continuum of provision, opportunities for inclusion and enables pupils’ movement and progression between the different types of provision. We would go further to state that the planning of new mainstream schools should take into account the needs of pupils with disabilities and/or SEN in the community, including

demographics and distances from other services. This could possibly mean planning for a special unit/school on site but could also mean well planned, time-bound special classes/transition arrangements or resourced mainstream classes to provide for optimal inclusion of pupils.

5. Shared Access to SNA. SNPA is concerned that there might be a general impression among our Public representatives that shared access to SNAs is working. The parental experience indicates otherwise in many of the correspondence from parents. Shared access to SNAs does not always work in classroom and school situations giving rise to unacceptable levels of risk from a health and safety point of view and in some cases to a reduction in inclusive opportunities, such as sport and play during yard time where logistical issues arise. In other cases, SNPA feels that the policy of shared access is linked to the view, within the Department, that SNAs are whole school resources rather than individualized supports. Here are just three examples of how shared access to SNA support does not work;
- a. An SNA, working in a main stream primary school, is assigned to a child who has been allocated full time support. Five other children who need support have been placed in her class in order to have access to support. At least one of these children requires full time support also.
 - b. Another SNA, also working in a primary school, is assigned full time to a child with medical needs. She is required to make herself available to two other children in two other classes who have access to support. Recently one of those children absconded from the school and ran out on to a very busy main road. The absence of the SNA was a contributing element.
 - c. In a second level school, a child with physical disabilities, who, previously had a full time SNA to support her, now shares that SNA with three other pupils. There is another SNA employed in the school but she works with the resource teacher. The child who has reduced support touches herself inappropriately on a continuous basis and is now being bullied severely by peers.
 - d. A child with physical difficulties wishing to do higher subject, is unable to do so as the SNA is shared between him and another pupil in his class and can only do so without the assistance of an SNA which is impracticable.

From a parental viewpoint it would appear that there is a widespread inconsistency in how schools employ SNAs and that this reality is, in turn, the result of a lack of clear or consistent guidelines to the priorities applied when the NCSE are allocating support to children and also a reflection of the school struggling to meet the actual needs of all the children. It's not clear whether its toileting needs, feeding requirements, medical or behavioural difficulties that are prioritised when allocating support and there appears to be a lack of consistency or transparency around the criteria applied and the skill set of different Principals to be able to manage the resource effectively.

6. Implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004. (4) It has been eight years since the passing of this act. Parents would appreciate an indication of more than a verbal intention to fully ratify all outstanding sections of the EPSEN Act in the lifetime of this government? Two outstanding aspects of EPSEN must be implemented that may require some level of additional expenditure;

- a. Individual Educational Plans-General application of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) as best practice i.e. linking the allocation of educational resources to IEPs so that it would be possible to track how educational supports for individual students were working to help them attain their educational goals. It is interesting to note that although IEPs are not yet mandatory under the Act, in the NCSE's most recent policy advice paper 'The Education of Children with Challenging Behaviour arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Disorders', the NCSE recommend "*Additional supports provided to mainstream schools for students with EBD/severe EBD should be time-bound, reviewed regularly and **conditional on the development of an individual education plan** which sets out educational and behavioural targets (Recommendation 4)*". (3)

Parents would like to see a mandatory framework for IEPs being developed and implemented in ALL schools, for EVERY child with SEN and which involves a collaborative approach between educators, therapists, parents and where appropriate, the child themselves being involved in drafting of an IEP.

- b. Independent Appeals Office - Establishment of an independent appeals process which must be independent of the NCSE, alongside an extension of the remit of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children to include the operations of the NCSE in the absence of an alternative Independent method of appeals.

7. School Transport Scheme (STS) for children with disabilities and/or SEN SNPA is of the opinion that the STS works against the principle of parental choice and flies in the face of the reality that in many cases, the most appropriately resourced school for a child with SEN may not be the local school. In fact current provision of school transport is based on an explicit acknowledgement that special educational needs is irrelevant i.e. ethos and language are the only specific grounds for departing from the rule of local school primacy. The current STS procedures go so far as to state that "the provision of therapeutic services such as Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Psychological Services etc. which are matters for the Health Service Executive will not be a factor in identifying the nearest recognised placement for transport eligibility purposes" (Nov 2011 DoE & S Circular *STS for Children with SEN arising from a Diagnosed Disability*). (6)

Some examples of the issues facing parents and families are:

- a. Parent, living in rural Ireland, has a child with a diagnosis of ASD and applied for a bus escort. The SENO approved of the seat on the bus but rejected the need for a bus escort and requested additional professional reports beyond what has been supplied by the parent to the school. The delay that followed resulted in the child being taken out of school as the parent could not be satisfied that her child would be safe while traveling on the bus. In the Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme, "*the committee recommends that clear criteria are identified on the circumstances in which a dedicated/shared escort is needed. This*

work should be put into effect from the 2011/2012 school year.” Section 7.12 (7)

- b. Parent living in rural Ireland and again with a child with ASD and ADHD, is not qualified for school transport because the current school is within the minimum distance allowed. Her second child, who is awaiting a diagnosis, is starting junior infants at same school. When applying for concessionary transport, the parent is told by the School Transport Section office that the bus will not collect junior infants. So, the parent is faced with having to put in place two different transport arrangements for two children attending the same school.
- c. Parent, living in rural Ireland, had a child, with ASD, enrolled in a local special school where, unfortunately, the child regressed significantly. Child was taken out of school due to health and safety concerns arising from hyper behaviour. Parent identified a more suitable special unit in a neighbouring county and was offered place there. School transport not provided and SENO insisted on original school as the only option. Parent is now driving a round trip daily of 160 km without any financial support.

8. Continuous Professional Development. Much improvement in special education delivery could be achieved through rigorous CPD of teachers, SNAs, and school principals/managers, particularly at secondary level. The parental experience of integrated mainstream schools is that resource teachers usually have far more knowledge of disability and SEN issues than class teachers and that the methodology used by the resource teacher does not always translate back into the mainstream class where the pupil will spend a significant portion of their day.

The critical weakness would appear to be in the areas of curriculum differentiation and whole school approaches to addressing the educational implications of particular disabilities and/or SEN. For example, teachers can persist in traditional teaching approaches such as asking pupils to stand up and recite multiplication tables or weekly spelling tests that are totally inappropriate for children who have dyslexia. All class teachers need opportunities to learn about specialist support teaching, the methods used and how these teachers and the class teacher can work as a team within the classroom programme. The short courses and in-service days which teachers and some SNAs are currently offered are not adequate in that an element of ‘hands-on training’ would be preferable for teachers to work with children with disabilities and/or SEN. A more comprehensive approach to the integration of special education into the core teacher training modules, rather than in addition to, would raise the level of overall skills of teachers to meet the demands of a diverse student population.

Awareness of disability issues, and skills in teaching and learning styles analysis and strategies suited to children with disabilities, should be a compulsory programme element in both primary and secondary teacher training. SNPA are aware that quite a number of teachers, particularly resource teachers, invest in training programmes in their own time and often at their own expense. The NCSE, in its 2011 report *The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland* (8), has recommended that the Department’s Teacher Education Section and the Teaching Council establish standards of teaching in relation to knowledge, skills and competence necessary for teaching pupils with SEN. It also recommends that those current programmes of initial teacher education and continuous professional development incorporate modules which are focused on the particular needs of children with Special Educational Needs, including those with

multiple and complex needs. SNPA welcomes these recommendations and has, in its discussions with the Department, learned of their plans to implement these specific recommendations.

Conclusion

Parents of children with special needs are not oblivious to the current economic climate that the government is operating within. However, it is important that government representatives and Ministers recognise that parents of children with special needs have to interface with several departments and State Bodies such as the HSE and NCSE and can feel under duress when their child's needs are not being met due to lack of resources. Both the State and the parents have a vested interest in maximising the future outcomes for children with special needs as they one day will become adults. Short sighted budgetary decisions to meet the current demands of external parties can have a detrimental effect on future outcomes and add to additional burdens on the State in the future. Maximising investment in children with disabilities serves to benefit not just the children themselves, but the future prospects of the Family to be a net contributor to the State.

Parental perspectives can be influenced greatly by the overall package of supports that they and their child receives in order to maximise the child's potential and alleviate the additional stresses and difficulties that can be experienced. It is often indicated by parents, that their child's disability is far easier to cope with and adapt to, than 'The System' and any measures that would make the system work better for them as opposed to working for the system itself, must be pursued in earnest by government representatives.

Referenced materials

1. *National Survey of Parental Attitudes to and Experiences of Local and National Special Education Services* NCSE 2010
2. SPECIAL EDUCATION CIRCULAR SP ED 02/05 Dept. of Education & Science
3. NCSE Policy Advice Paper: *The Education of Children with Challenging Behaviour arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Disorders* 2012.
4. Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004
5. *A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme 2007/8 to 2010* June 2011. Dept. of Education & Science
6. Nov 2011 DoE & S Circular *STS for Children with SEN arising from a Diagnosed Disability*
7. *Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme* Dept. of Education & Science 2011
8. NCSE Policy Advice Paper: *The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland* 2011.