

# Choosing a School

**A Guide For Parents and Guardians  
of Children and Young People  
with Special Educational Needs**







An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta  
National Council for Special Education

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with Special Educational Needs

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**Note**

The word ‘parent’ in this document should also be taken to include guardians of children.

# Foreword

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) supports an inclusive education system that enables children and adults with special educational needs to achieve their potential. This guide is intended to provide information to parents of children with special educational needs.

It is natural for all parents to be anxious about their child's future and what it may hold. Deciding where any child is to be educated can be a big decision but can be of even greater concern to parents of children with special educational needs. The majority of children with special educational needs now attend their local primary or post-primary mainstream school so most parents have no decision to make beyond enrolling their child in the local school. However, there are a small number of parents, whose children have severe and/or complex needs, who may have to consider whether their child would make better progress in a special or mainstream setting.

These guidelines were developed to inform parents about the range of educational placements and supports that are now available to their child in the system. The guidelines also set out a number of factors that parents might wish to take into account when choosing a school for their child with special educational needs, such as what are the child's learning needs and social needs? How far will s/he have to travel to school and so on?

Children with special educational needs mature and develop and their learning needs change over time. For this reason, it is important that their educational placement is kept under regular review to make sure that it remains the appropriate setting for them.

The NCSE places great importance on the delivery of a local service to schools and parents through our network of special educational needs organisers (SENOs) who are available throughout the country. These guidelines are intended to complement the work of SENOs and schools in helping parents to make an informed choice of school for their child with special educational needs.

I hope that the guidelines are helpful to you in the decision making process.

Teresa Griffin  
CEO

August 2013

# Glossary

ADD	Attention deficit disorder
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactive disorder
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
EWO	Educational welfare officer
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEP	Individual education plan
ISL	Irish sign language
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NEWB	National Educational Welfare Board
SEN	Special educational needs
SENO	Special educational needs organiser
SNA	Special needs assistant
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

# Introduction

This guide is designed to support and inform parents who are making decisions about where their children with special educational needs will be educated. It has been developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in consultation with schools, parents and other stakeholders and is based on current best practice in the educational placement of children with special educational needs. Above all else, the focus of the guide is on the well being and best interests of children with special educational needs.

As the primary and natural educators of their children, all parents have to choose where their children will be educated, including the possibility that they will be educated at home.<sup>1</sup>

Choosing a school for your child with special educational needs is a very important decision. There are no absolute indicators or criteria that, on their own, can be used to

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish Constitution recognises the family as the 'primary and natural educator of the child' but the State requires that each child receives a 'certain minimum education' (Article 42). Parents who choose to educate their child in a place other than a State-recognised school are required to apply to have their child registered with the National Educational Welfare Board. The board maintains a register of children receiving education outside the recognised school structure and assesses the adequacy of such education on an ongoing basis.



determine exactly where a child should be placed. The more information parents have about the range of provision and supports available, the better their choice is likely to be. The information in this guide puts the child's needs at the centre of the decision making process and takes into account good practice in assessment and planning for children with special educational needs, as well as the views and experiences of parents and other stakeholders.

The guide does not oblige parents to make any particular choices and has no legal standing. But it does provide important information to support parents through the decision making process.

Parents are advised to read this guide in conjunction with the NCSE Information Booklet for Parents (NCSE 2011a) which is available on the NCSE website at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

Part One:

# An Overview of Educational Provision and Supports

## 1 An Inclusive Approach to Education

Fewer than 1 per cent of students in Ireland now attend a special school.<sup>2</sup> In the vast majority of cases mainstream schools are the first choice for parents of children with special educational needs.

Irish schools are very inclusive and schools can access a range of supports to address the needs of students with special educational needs. Every mainstream school has a



learning support teacher service to complement the work of the class or subject teacher. In addition every school can apply for additional resource teaching hours or care supports to provide for students with more complex learning or care needs.

There is a range of international human rights legislation and agreements which supports inclusive education, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)<sup>3</sup> and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994).<sup>4</sup>

## Irish legislation on inclusion

In addition to this international support for inclusive education, Ireland passed the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act in 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). This Act asserts that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs.

The Act allows for two exceptions to this commitment. First, where an assessment, carried out under the Act, finds that this would not be in the best interests of the child with special educational needs. Second, where this would not be in the interests of the other children with whom the child is to be educated.

Increasingly children with special needs are educated in the mainstream system. At the same time, in exceptional cases where the evidence shows this is not in the interest of the child, or the children with whom s/he is to be educated, it is acknowledged that a special setting may be best suited to the child's needs.

### *Definition of Special Educational Needs: Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN), 2004*

**'Special Educational Needs' means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in, and benefit from, education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly.**

(Government of Ireland, 2004)

3 Please see <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>. Accessed on 30th January 2013

4 Please see [http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF). Accessed on 30th January 2013

## Three main types of educational provision in Ireland

There are three main types of provision to meet the range of educational needs found among students in primary and post-primary schools. These are:

- mainstream classes
- special classes in mainstream schools
- special schools.

This range of provision is sometimes described as a continuum (of provision), from fully inclusive mainstream classes at one end of the continuum, to placement in a special school at the other.

Wherever a child is placed the current thinking is that educational placements should be flexible rather than rigid or permanent. There should ideally be some opportunities for students to integrate with peers without special educational needs, and flexible movement along the continuum, as and when a child's needs change.

What this means is that students in special classes should be able to be included with the wider school community for some part of the day or week, or for some activities or subjects. It also means that students may move out of special classes over time as their needs change. Similarly, students in special schools should have opportunities for contact or activities that are appropriate to their needs, with students in mainstream schools.

Educational placements should be reviewed periodically as a student's needs change.

### *Three main types of educational provision*

**There are three main types of provision to meet the range of educational needs found among students in primary and post-primary schools. These are:**

- **mainstream classes**
- **special classes in mainstream school and**
- **special schools.**

**Wherever a child is placed, educational placements should be flexible. Educational placements should be reviewed periodically as a student's needs change.**

## 2 Mainstream Classes

The majority of children with special educational needs are educated in mainstream classes in their nearest primary or post-primary school. The class or subject teacher has primary responsibility for the progress of all students in the class, including those with special educational needs.

Class or subject teachers can differentiate the curriculum to address the variety of learning needs in the class. This means that the teacher adapts the curriculum to suit different students. Teachers can also use 'individualised education planning'. This may involve teachers working with parents and sometimes with other professionals, to develop a plan to guide and monitor an individual student's progress over time. Teachers are advised to use individualised planning to tailor teaching to suit individual needs (NCSE, 2006).

To support the class or subject teacher, all mainstream schools have access to the resources and supports necessary to provide for most children with special educational needs.

### Teaching support

All students with special educational needs will be taught primarily by the class or subject teacher. Some students with learning or special educational needs may need complementary teaching and/or other supports. All primary and post-primary schools have a learning support/resource teaching service which complements the work of the class teacher in supporting students who have the following needs:

- Learning difficulties, including students with mild speech and language difficulties, mild social or emotional difficulties, mild co-ordination or attention control difficulties associated with identified conditions such as dyspraxia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).
- A borderline mild or mild general learning disability.
- A specific learning disability (e.g. dyslexia).
- Learning support requirements where the student's attainment is in the lowest tenth percentile on standardised tests.
- An assessed syndrome (e.g. Down syndrome or Williams syndrome, with a mild or borderline mild general learning disability).

All primary and post-primary schools can apply to the NCSE for additional resource teaching support for students with special educational needs that occur less frequently in the population. Schools apply for this allocation to the NCSE through its countrywide network of local special educational needs organisers (SENOs). Eligibility for this additional support is governed by criteria set down by the DES and the supports are available for students who have:

- moderate, severe or profound general learning disability

- physical disability
- visual impairment (or are Blind)
- hearing Impairment (or are Deaf)
- emotional behavioural or severe emotional behavioural disturbance
- autism/autistic spectrum disorder
- specific speech and language disorder
- multiple disabilities (defined by the DES as a combination of any two of the above needs)
- an assessed syndrome (e.g. Down syndrome or Williams syndrome with a moderate, severe or profound general learning disability).

### Care support

All schools can apply to the NCSE for special needs assistant (SNA) support for students with significant care needs arising from a disability.

Schools may apply for SNA support where a student has 'a significant medical need for such assistance, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or where their behaviour is such that they are a danger to themselves or to other pupils' (DES, 2002).

### Assistive technology

All schools can apply for grants to buy essential specialist equipment for a student with special educational needs. This scheme is for students who have physical and/or communicative disabilities to the extent that without technological support it is not possible for them to access the school curriculum (DES, 2013).



### *Supports in mainstream schools*

- **The class/subject teacher can adapt the curriculum to meet the student's learning needs.**
- **The class/subject teacher can develop a plan to guide a student's progress over time.**
- **All primary and post-primary schools have a learning support/resource teaching service to complement the work of the classroom teacher for students with learning support or special educational needs.**
- **All primary and post-primary schools can apply to the NCSE for additional resource teaching support for students with special educational needs that occur less frequently in the population.**
- **All schools can apply to the NCSE for special needs assistant (SNA) support for students with significant care needs arising from a disability.**
- **All schools can apply for grants to buy essential specialist equipment for students who are unable to access the school curriculum without this technological support.**

### **Effective use of supports in mainstream classes**

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed guidance for schools and teachers on how to plan for, and make the best use of, available supports for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools.

This guidance recommends a staged approach to assessment and the provision of support and is outlined in documents called *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (DES 2007a, 2010a). NEPS has also set out more specialised guidance for schools supporting students with behavioural, emotional and/or social difficulties (DES 2010b).

These publications provide a flexible framework for schools to use when putting in place supports tailored to meet the individual needs of students. The NCSE has strongly endorsed the use of these guidelines by schools, and parents too may find them helpful in understanding what happens once a child has started school.

The DES provides guidance to schools on how best to use available supports in a number of published documents: *Learning-Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000), *Circular Letter SpEd 02/05* (DES, 2005), and *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs*:

Post-Primary Guidelines (DES, 2007b). The three documents are available on the DES website at [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

### 3 Special Settings

#### Special schools

Special schools support students with more severe and/or complex special educational needs in cases where a full time mainstream placement would not be in the student's best interest. These students may find the demands of mainstream schools very difficult, or may have complex learning or other difficulties which require smaller class sizes. In order to be placed in a special school a child must have a professional report stating that s/he has a special educational need.

Special schools tend to have fewer students and support students in small class sizes. A special school for students with moderate general learning disabilities for example, has one teacher for every eight students.

SENOs can sanction additional teacher and care supports for special schools to meet the range of needs in the school, in line with DES criteria. SENOs will be able to advise parents about the location and services available in the nearest special school.

#### *What is a complex special educational need?*

**Students with complex special educational needs are generally understood to be:**

- **Those students who have been assessed as having special educational needs arising from two or more low incidence disabilities, thereby requiring support from a number of different services or**
- **Students with a severe or profound level of special educational needs arising from a single disability or**
- **Students with special educational needs who have been placed in a mainstream or special class and who following continuous evaluation as part of the NEPS Continuum of Support, are considered not to be benefiting from such a placement or who are impinging negatively on the education of other students in the class.**

From *NCSE Policy Advice on the Future Role of Special Schools and Classes* (NCSE, 2011b)

## Special classes in mainstream schools

Special classes offer a supportive learning environment for students with more complex needs where mainstream classes would not, or have not been able to, meet their needs. In order to be placed in a special class a child must have a professional report stating that s/he has a special educational need.

Special classes have lower pupil teacher ratios than mainstream classes. Placement in a special class is a flexible arrangement that may change as a student's learning develops. Students in special classes should also be given opportunities to be included in mainstream classes for some activities or subjects, in as far as possible. The NCSE sanctions the establishment of special classes where there is evidence that there is a number of children with special educational needs, within an area, who require such a setting.

Currently about 12 per cent of mainstream schools have special classes. SENOs can advise parents on where these are or may be located.

### *Supports in special settings (special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools)*

- **A supportive learning environment for children with more severe and/or complex special educational needs**
- **Smaller class sizes than a mainstream class**
- **Care supports for students with significant care needs arising from a disability**
- **Assistive technology**

## 4 Other Available Supports

### Home tuition grants

The State funds a home tuition grant scheme for children who are too ill to attend school, or who miss substantial periods of schooling due to illness. This scheme can also be accessed as an interim measure by children with special educational needs who are awaiting an appropriate school placement. Details of the home tuition scheme are available on the DES website under Services and Information for Parents.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/> Accessed on 23rd May 2013

## Transport to school

As a general rule, the NCSE advises that students with special educational needs should go to a mainstream school, unless there is professional evidence of complex or severe special needs to indicate that the child needs a special placement.

Bus Éireann, on behalf of the DES, operates a school transport scheme for children with special educational needs who are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school or special class or special school, that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs.

Details of the school transport scheme for children with special educational needs are available on the DES website under Services and Information for Parents.

For a variety of reasons, a parent may wish to enrol their child in a school other than the nearest school. A parent may wish to send their child to a school with a particular ethos or a school which has particular educational programmes or health-funded supports available.

The availability of school transport is an important factor for parents to consider in these situations as the DES funds transport arrangements only to the nearest recognised school that is or can be resourced to meet the educational needs of the child.

Providing or funding alternative transport to a school a long distance away may be stressful. Family circumstances may also change over time, impacting on the ability of the family to continue such a commitment, so a decision like this needs careful thought and forward planning.



Exceptional circumstances can arise from time to time for any family. Parents need to consider what will happen if they are, through unforeseen circumstances, unable to continue transporting their child with special educational needs to a school further away than the nearest school which can be resourced to meet their needs. Parents should have back-up plans in place for such eventualities.

### **Special educational needs organiser (SENO)**

Parents of children starting school or changing school should apply to have the child enrolled in all schools in their locality. SENOs will be able to advise on the location of special classes or special schools in the area.

From time to time, parents may experience a delay in finding a school place for a child with special educational needs. This may be for a number of reasons. For example, the opening of a special class may be delayed if a school building is not ready; a school may refuse to enrol a child and the appeals process under Section 29 of the Education Act may be under way; or a child may have moved to a new location where there are no school places available.

If parents are having difficulty finding a placement for a child with special educational needs, they should contact the local SENO for advice.

**It is important to remember that students with special educational needs should generally go to a mainstream school, unless there is professional evidence of complex or severe special needs to indicate that the child needs a special placement.**

### **Educational welfare officers (EWOs)**

Educational welfare officers (EWOs) are employed by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB). Their job is to support families and to make sure that every child receives an education, as required in law. They are also responsible for making sure that a child who is not attending school receives a minimum education.

Any parent who is having problems ensuring their child attends school regularly, or who encounters a serious delay in finding a school placement, may request the advice and assistance of an EWO. They work in the best interests of the children and young people who do not attend school regularly.

EWOs work collaboratively with schools and other agencies, including the NCSE.

## National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Most schools have access to a NEPS educational psychologist who plays an important role in the provision of necessary supports and identification of the most appropriate educational placement for children with special educational needs. This role is outlined in the box below.

### *Role of NEPS in supporting educational placement*

- **NEPS supports schools and parents to build up a profile of a child's needs and strengths across relevant developmental areas, through consultation and assessment, as necessary. This work is guided by the Continuum of Support Framework.**
- **NEPS guides teachers and parents on appropriate programmes, interventions and strategies to help meet the child's needs.**
- **NEPS advises and supports schools in developing and reviewing educational and behavioural plans, particularly at key transition points.**
- **NEPS liaises with relevant health and other professionals involved with the child.**
- **NEPS helps parents to explore the range of placement options that will meet the child's needs.**

**When a change of placement is being considered (e.g. a move in or out of a special class or school) schools are advised to prioritise such cases for consultation with the NEPS psychologist at the earliest stage.**

## Access to health supports in school

Students with special educational needs may require access to health-funded support services whether they are enrolled in special schools, special classes or in mainstream classes. Health supports include clinical psychology, psychiatry, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

The NCSE is aware that health service providers in some areas are linked to special schools or specific special classes in mainstream schools. Such services and supports can be lost if a student leaves a special school or a special class to attend a mainstream class.

The NCSE is also aware that, in a small number of cases, parents seek to enrol their child in a particular school because it has, or is perceived to have, better health supports.

Health professionals should advise parents of the health services that are available in their region and the way in which their child can access these services.

New developments under way in the health sector include the establishment of early intervention and school intervention teams to provide assessment and intervention for students whether they are being educated in a mainstream or special setting. In the future these teams will be able to provide a profile of the strengths and needs of each child who avails of services.

These developments are very welcome as access to health supports should be provided in line with student needs, irrespective of whether they go to a mainstream school or a special school. However it may be a few years before the changes are fully in place. While awaiting the full roll-out of the HSE teams, schools should not refuse enrolment of a child on the basis that the child cannot access health supports.

### ***Supports to help students with special educational needs to access education***

- **Home tuition grants for children who are too ill to attend school or for children with special educational needs who are awaiting an appropriate school placement, as an interim measure.**
- **School transport scheme for children with special educational needs who are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school or special class or special school, that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs.**
- **Educational welfare officers (EWOs) support families and make sure that every child receives an education, as required in law.**
- **SENOs can give information and advice to parents who are having difficulty finding a placement for a child with special educational needs.**
- **NEPS psychologists support students with special educational needs and are available to help parents explore the range of placement options that will meet the child's needs.**
- **Some students with special educational needs need access to health supports, including clinical psychology, psychiatry, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.**

Part Two:

# Making an Informed Choice

## **1 Choosing an Appropriate Education**

Parents make the final decision on where a child goes to school and must be satisfied that the placement will result in a good outcome for the child. Parents may talk to a number of other people in the course of making this decision. They may want to discuss options with their child and include them in the decision making process for instance. They may want to contact other parents of children with special educational needs for information and advice; and they may wish to consult professionals involved with their child and/or prospective school personnel.



## Mainstream placement

It is clear from Part One of this guide that the level and range of special educational supports now available in Irish schools means that most students with special needs can be enrolled and well supported in their nearest mainstream school.

As noted earlier fewer than 1 per cent of students are educated in special schools in Ireland.

## Special placement

Special placements, either in special classes in mainstream schools or in special schools, are suitable for a relatively small proportion of students where there is evidence that this kind of provision is required because of:

- the severity and complexity of the student's special educational needs and/or
- poor educational outcomes being achieved by the student in an existing or previous early intervention, pre-school or school setting and/or
- the communication or socialisation needs of the student and/or
- the student's behaviour impinging negatively on other students in the class and/or
- the student finding the activity levels and bustle of mainstream schools to be very challenging and difficult.

If a special setting is being considered, it is important to think about what outcomes might be achievable in a special setting and whether similar outcomes can be achieved within a mainstream setting.

## Young children (three to five years)

Deciding to place a young child (aged three to five) in a special setting requires particularly careful consideration.

It may be premature to decide what will work for a young child, as a child's needs may not have fully emerged or may not yet have been comprehensively assessed. In addition, young children may have had little or no opportunity to mix with typically developing peers in a school setting, so their capacity to manage in a mainstream environment may not be known.

However, it is the case that for some young children with very complex special educational needs a placement in a special setting may be appropriate.

The decision about the educational placement of a child with special educational needs usually evolves over a period of time. Generally parents will make the decision following a process of assessment, intervention and review which takes place over time.

## Advice from professionals

Professionals who can assist in the decision making process include principals, teachers, NEPS psychologists, SENOs, Health Service Executive or private psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, medical doctors and so on.

Professional reports should be based on an objective assessment of educational needs and capacities, and care needs where relevant. They should indicate:

- the nature, extent and complexity of the child's special educational need
- the child's capacity to cope with the placement being proposed
- the child's levels of academic and adaptive functioning
- the child's communication, language, social, emotional and developmental progress
- the child's personal development, life skills and self esteem
- the child's ability to form friendships, and the likelihood of isolation
- the child's family context and parental views.

Professionals have a duty to provide objective, evidence-based advice to parents.

## 2 Key Issues to Guide Parents' Decision Making

The following are important points that parents should be aware of when making decisions about educational placements for children with special educational needs.

### Mainstream education is the first option for most children with special needs

The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) provides that wherever possible children with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with other children who do not have such needs. A mainstream educational placement should therefore be the first option considered for most children. A special placement may be recommended for some students with complex or severe needs for whom a mainstream placement may not be in their best interest or the best interest of other students.

### Education and learning are paramount

Assessing the learning needs and the potential of the individual student is of paramount importance. School is an educational setting for the student, and not a childcare placement. Parents and professionals should have high expectations for student learning that are grounded in an understanding of the student's learning needs. Education should challenge all students in a positive way, including those with special educational needs.

## **SENOs provide a valuable local service**

SENOs can provide valuable support and information to parents during the decision making process, for example on the location of schools, the criteria governing access to additional supports, the application process and so on.

## **Assessments should review and explore interventions and outcomes**

An assessment of a child can be undertaken by teachers in the school, or where necessary by a NEPS psychologist or by HSE professionals such as a clinical psychologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, psychiatrist and so on. Assessments should include a rigorous examination of the outcomes achieved by the child from any intervention or support to date. In the case of post-primary schools, the experience of the student in primary or special school should be taken into account. In the case of primary schools, the experience of the child in a pre-school or early intervention setting should be taken into account.

It should also include an evaluation of the interventions that could be put in place within available resources, to support the inclusion of the student in mainstream education and to generally inform teaching and learning.

## **Professional reports should be clear, comprehensive and specific**

Professionals should provide a report to parents, following the assessment of their child. Such professionals include psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, and so on. Professional reports may be needed if a parent wishes to enrol a child in a special school or class. They may be needed if the school is applying for resource teaching or care supports for the child. They may also be needed if in post-primary school, the student wishes to apply for reasonable accommodation in State examinations.

Professionals have a duty to provide objective, evidence-based advice to parents. If the report is not clear or if parents do not understand what is written in the report, they should request assistance from the professional who wrote the report.

## **Educational placement options should be presented clearly to parents**

If a special educational placement is being recommended, the professional's report should set out placement options that could meet the student's needs, explain the available placement options and the implications of those options, for discussion with parents.

## Visiting schools is important

School factors parents should consider include the school's physical and social environment and distance from home. In the case of special placements parents may want to explore what curriculum is on offer, what certification options are available and how the placement will be reviewed over time in line with the child's needs.

Accessibility in a building is important for students with a physical or sensory disability. For example, a student using a wheelchair may need to access the school building via a ramp. A school may need to apply for additional funding for these physical modifications and time is needed to complete any building work – no matter how minor – and comply with planning regulations.

Parents may need to take into account the distance to be travelled to school. Some journeys can involve the student leaving home at a very early hour and arriving home late in the evening. Younger students, in particular, can find travelling tiring and tiredness may then inhibit their ability to take part fully in school or to enjoy family life. It can sometimes be counterproductive for children to travel away from their own community to attend a special school as they then do not know other children in their local area and can feel isolated in their communities.

For a child with a life-threatening condition, ensuring medical support arrangements can be put in place is a crucial consideration for a parent in choosing an educational placement.

School factors are important and can be explored during a parent's visit to a school. Parents will find it useful to visit the placements on offer. Many schools have open days and parents should find out when the open day is taking place as this is a good opportunity to visit a school. It may also be possible for schools to make arrangements with parents who require an alternative date.

## A decision to move schools requires careful thought and planning

A further issue may arise when a new special school/class opens in a region closer to the student's home. Parents may wish to consider moving their child nearer home in these circumstances. Moving school is a big decision for any student and may be particularly stressful for a student with special educational needs, even when the move might prove beneficial, both from an educational and practical viewpoint.

Moving school can also result in additional costs for parents e.g. different school uniform, books etc. In these circumstances, it is advised that parents should take adequate time to consider these costs and prepare children for the move.

*Points for parents to consider when choosing a school for their child with special educational needs*

- 1. Who do I need to talk to when choosing a school for my child with special educational needs – other parents, my child, teachers, SENOs, other professionals with whom my child is involved?**
- 2. Have I thought about sending my child to a mainstream school?**
- 3. Will my child be challenged to learn, in a positive way, in the chosen school?**
- 4. Do I need to contact my local SENO for advice about the availability of local placements, how to apply to a school etc?**
- 5. Have the necessary assessments taken place?**
- 6. Do I clearly understand what the professional report is saying about my child's needs?**
- 7. Do I know all the placement options available and how they will benefit my child?**
- 8. It is important for a parent to visit the school placements that are on offer.**

Part Three:

# Advance Planning for Starting or Moving School

## **1 Parent Responsibilities**

Parents are strongly advised to engage with the school and the local SENO at the earliest opportunity, certainly once a decision on a school has been made, but it is even better to make contact earlier. This enables both



the school and parents to openly discuss the needs of the child and to plan for the child's enrolment. For example, the school may need to make applications for additional teaching and/or SNA support and/or organise training courses for teachers. The school needs time, and advance notice, to put such arrangements in place.

Parents should:

- Engage with the local SENO at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Apply in good time to enrol their child and establish, with the school and SENO, the documentation required to support applications for additional supports if necessary.
- Provide the SENO and school with all relevant information (any assessments, reports from pre-school settings, school reports, medical requirements etc) on their child's special needs in good time to allow for planning.
- Plan to transition their child from pre-school to primary school or primary to post-primary school (many children benefit from additional preparation to smooth the transition process).
- Be open with professionals and school staff.
- Work with schools to ensure that there is a consistent home-school approach.

A parent may have a particular preference for a school e.g. the closest school or a school they attended themselves. In these cases, parents are strongly advised to contact the school to establish:

- If there is a place available in the school.
- What educational programmes are available or could be provided in the school.
- What supports are available, or could be made available, to the school to support their child's needs.
- What training the staff require to meet the needs of the student. For example, if a child communicates solely through Irish sign language (ISL) is there a teacher in place who can use ISL? If not, can such training be put in place?

If a school refuses to enrol a child with special educational needs, parents can appeal to the DES under Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998).

In addition the NCSE has developed an internal appeals process for schools that wish to appeal a decision on the allocation of additional supports to schools. The details of this appeals process are available on the NCSE website.<sup>6</sup>

The EPSEN Act also contains important sections that refer to assessments, education plans and appeals that parents can initiate. These sections of the EPSEN Act are not yet active however, as they have not officially commenced.

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6 Please see: [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

## 2 School Responsibilities

Schools should ensure that information is available to parents about supports in the school and how they will facilitate access to the curriculum in line with the student's learning needs. This information should be made available on school websites and through other documentation.

Schools should also ensure that they adopt a policy of welcoming students with special educational needs in line with the national policy on an inclusive approach to education. In particular, schools should check that their enrolment policies comply with all legislative requirements, see Appendix 1 for some of the key references.

Schools should provide information to parents on how the staged process of assessment, intervention and review works in their school. This will help inform parents' decisions on the ongoing placement of their child with special educational needs.



Schools should use an individualised planning process, with meaningful learning targets and measurable outcomes in place for each student, to ensure access to the curriculum and the recording of progress over time.

In summary schools should ensure that they have:

- a flexible enrolment policy which enables early planning for students with special educational needs
- provided early confirmation of enrolment to allow for planning to take place, where required
- advised the parents of the nature of any documentation required e.g. assessment or medical reports
- arranged for teacher training if particular interventions are required



- applied for additional teaching and/or SNA support in line with the closing dates for the relevant scheme
- ensured that the school building is accessible as necessary
- applied for any assistive technology and/or specialist equipment which may be needed by the child
- applied for special transport arrangements, if necessary
- liaised with the visiting teacher service, as appropriate
- consulted with the NEPS psychologist when a change of placement is being considered (e.g. a move in or out of a special class or school).

### **3 Flexibility, Review and Evaluation of School Placements**

Students mature and develop differently. Their learning and support needs change. Some require more support when they are younger. Others when they are older. Students with special educational needs benefit and develop as a result of support and interventions provided in schools. For all of these reasons, educational placements must be kept under regular review.

Parents and schools are advised to ensure that children are being served well by their school placement. There should be flexibility so that students can move along the continuum of provision as their individual needs change over time, and in accordance with their best interests.

A move into a special class or a special school is not a placement of last resort or a permanent arrangement. It is an option exercised in line with a student's needs and best interests and other options may be more appropriate when needs change or capacities develop. It can be difficult to assess the most appropriate placement for a young child so particular flexibility is required to allow young children to change placement, as required. Some children can begin in a special school and may then be able to transfer into a mainstream school later on. Some may start life in mainstream school in a special class and move gradually to a mainstream class. Similarly some children may manage mainstream when younger and move to a special placement in line with their needs later on.

Schools should review a student's individual education plan annually (or more often if necessary). The review should involve school personnel, parents and the student. The SENO and NEPS psychologist or other professionals may also be involved, if required.

When a review is carried out, and where alternative options are being considered, schools should seek a consultation with their NEPS psychologist. Schools and parents should also contact their SENO so that they may be advised of any changes in facilities in the local area.

*Final important points for parents of children with special educational needs*

- **The local mainstream school is the first option for most children with special educational needs.**
- **If you have evidence that your child may need a special setting, find out all the available options for your child.**
- **If your child is starting school or changing school, apply to have your child enrolled in all schools in your locality.**
- **Apply in good time to enrol your child in school.**
- **Find out what, if any, documentation is necessary and be ready to provide whatever reports are required.**
- **Contact your local SENO for advice and information as early as possible.**
- **Contact details for SENOs are available on the NCSE website ([www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)) or through your local primary or post-primary school. You can contact the SENO dealing with your area by email or by phone or by letter.**
- **Allow sufficient time for all the necessary planning to take place when your child is starting or changing schools.**

Appendix 1:

# Responsibilities of Schools and Agencies

This appendix sets out some key responsibilities of schools and State agencies in relation to the education of students with special educational needs.

## **Responsibilities of schools**

Each school has clear responsibilities – many of which are set out in legislation – aimed at ensuring that children with special educational needs have access to an appropriate education.



- Section 9 (a) of the Education Act states that each State-recognised school is required to ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for (Government of Ireland, 1998).
- Each school should have in place a clear school-based staged process of assessment, intervention and review over time, which informs decisions regarding the placement of students with special educational needs. This involves appropriate data being gathered across various areas of development (including academic, social, emotional and life skills) that is used to modify programmes and instructional practices (DES, 2005).
- Both mainstream schools, that have enrolled students who access additional teaching or care supports or who are placed in special classes, and special schools should ensure that each student’s individual education plan sets out:
  - specific learning targets and timelines
  - additional teaching and care supports to be provided and
  - expected outcomes.
- Individual education plans for students in special classes should identify the expected opportunities for students to be included in mainstream classes and the potential opportunities for reverse inclusion.
- Section 7 of the Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000a) confirms that each State-recognised school must ensure that its policies do not discriminate in relation to:
  - The admission or the terms of conditions of admission of a person as a student to the school
  - The access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the school
  - Any other term or condition or participation in the school by a student
  - The expulsion of a student from the school or any other sanction against the student

unless that compliance with any of the above provisions in relation to a student with a disability would, by virtue of the disability, make impossible, or have a seriously detrimental effect on, the provision by an educational establishment of its services to other students.
- Under Section 21 of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), school plans are required to state the objectives of the school and the measures which the school proposes to take to achieve those objectives, including equality of access to, and

participation in the school, by students with disabilities or who have other special educational needs.

It follows therefore, that school enrolment policies and practices should have no overt or covert barriers in place which deter students with special educational needs from applying to enrol in a school. Examples of such barriers are where schools may advise a parent that:

- another mainstream or similar school is better resourced or would be able to better support their child
  - the enrolment of a student with special educational needs is conditional on the provision of additional educational resources
  - health supports must be in place before their child can be enrolled or
  - available places in a special class must be kept for prospective students from a feeder school, thereby limiting the category of students with special educational needs who can enrol in the class.
- Section 23 (2)(e) of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), requires the principal to encourage the involvement of parents in the education of students and in the achievements of the objectives of the school.

### **Responsibilities of state agencies**

A number of State agencies support the education of students with special educational needs and may have a role in providing guidance on placement options.



### ***The Department of Education and Skills (DES)***

The role of the DES is to enable learners to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's economic, social and cultural development. A key Departmental goal, as articulated in the DES statement of strategy 2011 – 2014 (DES, 2011), is to provide a quality inclusive school and early years education system with improved learning outcomes.

The DES articulates government policy on education, funds schools, pays teachers and other school staff, provides direct support and advice to schools, continuing professional development for teachers and funds school transport services. Through its inspectorate, the DES provides an external evaluation of schools.

The DES provides a psychological support service for schools and students through its National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). The NEPS service to schools provides a balance between casework, support and development work. Casework focuses on the needs of individual pupils and is carried out through the process set out in the NEPS Continuum of Support guidelines. NEPS uses a problem-solving approach to assessment and intervention when working with those involved with the pupil's education and development. Cases are prioritised following a planning meeting(s) in the school. Support and development work involves work of a more preventative nature, where the psychologist may be involved in projects, the provision of advice and support to teachers or groups of teachers, or to the whole school on relevant school policies and procedures.

The DES also funds the appellant process under Section 29 of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). Section 29 of the Education Act, gives parents the right to appeal certain decisions made by a school's board of management, or a person acting on behalf of the board of management, to the secretary general of the DES.

### ***The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)***

The NCSE is an independent agency funded by the State. The NCSE promotes a continuum of educational provision, which is inclusive and responsive, and which provides an appropriate education for children and adults with special educational needs. The NCSE does this by providing additional teaching and other supports to schools; advice to educators and parents; undertaking and disseminating research into special education; and by providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education issues.

The NCSE employs special educational needs organisers (SENOs) who plan and co-ordinate the provision of State-funded educational services to students with special educational needs at a local level and provide advice and information to parents on State-funded special educational services in their area. SENOs sanction additional

teaching and SNA resources to schools. SENOs make recommendations to the DES in respect of applications for school transport arrangements, assistive technology etc.

In planning and co-ordinating the provision of placement options, the NCSE is mindful of the national policy of an inclusive approach to education – unless otherwise contra-indicated.

### ***The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB)***

The National Educational Welfare Board is an independent statutory agency, established under the Education (Welfare) Act, (Government of Ireland, 2000b) with responsibility for ensuring that every child in the State, either attends school, or otherwise receives an education. In particular, the board has a key role in responding to instances where children are not attending school regularly, or where there is concern about the child's educational welfare. Section 14 (1) of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, obliges the NEWB to establish and maintain a register of all children in receipt of an education in a place other than a recognised school.

Parents are able to appeal a decision, under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998, by a school to permanently exclude a student, or suspend a student for a cumulative period of 20 school days in any one school year, or refuse to enrol a student in the school. Where such an appeal fails or no appeal has been brought, the NEWB will make all reasonable efforts to have the child enrolled in another recognised school. If this is not possible, NEWB will – with the consent of the child's parents and the Minister for Education and Skills – make such other arrangements, as it considers appropriate, to ensure that the child receives a certain minimum education and shall monitor the progress of the child's education.

A parent who is experiencing problems in ensuring that his/her child attends school regularly may request the advice and assistance of NEWB. Education welfare officers employed by NEWB work in the interests of the children and young people who do not attend school regularly and work collaboratively with schools and other agencies in meeting the needs of the children and the young people concerned.

### ***The Health Service Executive (HSE)***

The HSE delivers thousands of different health and social services in hospitals and communities across the country.

The HSE provides a range of services for people with intellectual, physical and sensory disabilities or autism. These services include basic health services as well as assessment, rehabilitation, community care and residential care.

Some services are provided directly by the HSE. Many of the community, residential and rehabilitative training services are provided by voluntary organisations with grant aid from the HSE.

The HSE and its associated funded service providers employ health professionals who play a key role in supporting children with special educational needs. These include medical doctors and consultants, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, psychiatrists and many others.

The Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005) provides for, among other things, the assessment of need of people with disabilities and the consequent drawing up of service statements. At present only those children who were born after 1 June 2002 are eligible to apply for an assessment under the Disability Act (regardless of their age at the time of application). The assessment of need is carried out or arranged by assessment officers who are independent officers of the HSE. After the assessment, a service statement is drawn up by a liaison officer who is also a HSE official.

When the assessment is complete, the assessment officer writes a report which sets out:

- a statement of the nature and extent of the disability, if any
- a statement of the health and education needs arising from the disability
- a statement of the appropriate services to meet those needs
- a statement of the period within which a review of the assessment should be carried out (this must be no later than a year from the date the assessment report is issued).

The HSE is currently rolling out a new national programme to improve disability services for children and young people aged 0-18.<sup>7</sup> This programme aims to have one clear pathway to services for all children with disabilities living in an area so that no family is left without a service. The programme involves health and education personnel working together to support children with disabilities so that all available resources are used to the greatest benefit for children and families.

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