

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection to discuss provision for children with special needs in second level schools on 18th November 2015.

Presentation by: Sé Goulding, Head of Operations and Support Services, NCSE

Introduction

I thank the Chair and members of this Joint Committee, for the opportunity to present on the provision for students in post-primary schools. Before I begin, I would like to introduce my colleague, Mary Byrne, Head of Special Education at NCSE.

The NCSE is committed to the development of an inclusive post-primary education system that enables young people with special educational needs to achieve their potential. We are pleased that our work, funded through significant DES investment, has contributed to bringing about considerable progress in post-primary provision over the last decade.

Over the last three years the number of post-primary special classes has risen from approximately 134 to 205 reflecting the transition of students from primary special classes into their local post-primary school. Teacher knowledge and understanding of special educational needs is improving with many post-primary teachers engaging in professional development of high quality. Students' access to a diverse and relevant curriculum is increasing and the possibility of Level 1 and Level 2 Junior Cycle qualifications will be a welcome addition, when available in schools.

We also know that some students with special educational needs find participation in post-primary education difficult. Many reasons are given for this, including the greater number of teachers and students, larger school buildings, more complex timetabling and subject choice, a focus on state examinations, and the more complex social and emotional demands made on post-primary aged students

Today's presentation draws on our 2013 strategic review of special education which specifically addressed some of the challenges faced by post-primary schools. The review was informed by a detailed examination of national and international research findings, widespread consultation with the education partners and the expertise of our Council members.

How are post-primary students currently supported in schools?

In **2014/2015** education funded supports for post-primary students included:

- Over 3,400 additional teaching posts are allocated to post-primary schools to enable them to provide additional educational support to students with special educational or learning support needs.
- Over 1,860 **SNA posts** allocated to support post-primary students with significant care needs in mainstream classes.

- 205 (now 254) **special classes** in 138 post-primary schools are in place, staffed by 301 teachers and 346 SNAs to provide supportive educational settings for students who are unable to be fully included in mainstream classes.
- Other DES funded supports included assistive technology, special transport scheme, specialist equipment, extended school year and reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations.
- Support from the National Educational Psychological Service, the Visiting Teacher Service, the Special Education Support Service and the National Behaviour Support Service.

What do we know from research findings?

Three NCSE-commissioned studies specifically address the experiences of post-primary students in education. The first of these is focused on the transition from primary to post-primary school. It found that young people and their parents had concerns about losing the familiarity of teachers and friends in primary, their ability to 'fit in' in post-primary and possible under-performance. In most cases however, schools had very good transition programmes in place which enabled students to settle in and to report that many of their fears had not actually materialized. We intend to publish some guidelines on transitioning in the near future.

The second study is focused on educational experiences of post-primary students with special educational needs in Irish schools and will shortly be published.

Its findings show that:

- The majority of post-primary students in the study are positive about school.
- They identify their relationship with teachers and peers as having the greatest influence on how they experience education.
- They want to be actively involved in decision making around matters that affect their education and they value flexibility.
- They enjoy practical subjects and lessons that are interactive and afford the opportunity for cooperative group work.
- Many prefer accreditation that involves portfolios rather than written exams.

They have mixed views about how support should be provided to them. Many are clear that they prefer teachers to anticipate difficulties and adjust their teaching so they are not singled out for individual support within the classroom. They are positive about in-class team-teaching and resource teaching provided there is good communication, consistency and linkages between the different teachers involved.

Their experience of SNA support is generally positive but they point out that overly specific or individually-focused support interferes with them forming friendships with others in their classes. In their view, schools should carefully consider how additional classroom adult support can be given so as to reduce the possibility of the students being perceived by others as being different or requiring additional help which may lead to the inhibition of social development.

Last year, the NCSE published an information booklet for parents and students on post-school options for adults and school leavers with disabilities. This was in response to the need, advised by parents, for more information on the post-school pathways, options and supports available to school-leavers.

The 2013 NCSE-funded research study on post-school transitions also highlighted a number of issues which need to be addressed including: equity of assessment requirements for eligibility for the DARE scheme; lack of early school career planning and the perception by school professionals that they lacked specific knowledge on aspects of supports available in further and higher education.

What does the NCSE advise?

Today we would like to highlight three issues from our own previous policy advice:

Developing Teacher Competencies

Research findings are consistently clear that access to experienced and qualified teachers is a key factor in students' progress and outcomes. For students with special educational needs, this means having teachers who understand how they learn and who are able to adapt their teaching to meet their needs.

We previously recommended that the Teaching Council and the DES should ensure that teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to meet the diverse learning needs of these students. We are pleased that the Teaching Council is now developing a framework for the continuing professional development of teachers and advise that this must take particular account of the training requirements of post-primary teachers.

The quality of inclusion is dependent on the quality of school leadership. Principals need to understand the importance of deploying additional teachers and school resources in an equitable manner in line with the educational needs of their students and with teachers' professional competencies. We have previously raised concerns that certain post-primary schools may use additional teaching hours to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio or to create small class groups for teaching higher level courses in post-primary or to fill teacher timetables to bring them up to the required teaching time. We welcome the establishment of the Centre for School Leadership as it can play an important role in providing principals with access to the quality training and support necessary to lead inclusive learning in their schools.

Special classes

We welcome that many post-primary schools have inclusive admissions policies and work with us to open special classes as can be seen by the increase in the number of special classes over the last three years. But we are disappointed that SENOs can still encounter soft barriers in opening special classes, even where clearly needed. At present, there is no specific obligation for any school to open a special class. We believe that this needs to change to ensure that schools do not have a veto. It is important that all students are given the opportunity, in line with their best interests, to attend a school in their community. The NCSE has requested the DES to provide us with the appropriate legislative authority in this respect.

Re-balancing of supports in post-primary schools

We recognise that additional care support must be provided to assist schools to support students whose care needs are significantly above that which would normally be expected to be delivered by the teacher in the classroom situation. However, post-primary management bodies, teachers and students have advised us that access to SNA support is not desirable for post-primary students unless absolutely essential as it impedes the development of independence and interferes with the development of peer relationships.

We have recommended that further supplementary teaching support from fully qualified teachers should be provided in post-primary to drive the improvement of educational outcomes for students.

Finally....

We are very pleased that the DES is currently piloting the NCSE's working group proposed new model for allocating additional teaching supports to schools. It is important that the pilot informs and finesses the model so that when implemented, available teaching resources are allocated in a fairer and better way to schools.

Today I have focused on changes that could make a real difference to the quality of education offered to post-primary students but we need to listen to their voices as we plan and introduce these changes.