**Submission to Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection**

**1 July 2015**

Thank you for your invitation to attend this afternoon’s meeting. I wish to introduce my colleague Niall Feeney – Assistant Principal in the NCSE operations section.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to further contribute to your discussions on the role of SNAs and to provide an update since we last met in October 2013.

As advised previously, the NCSE is a very strong supporter of the SNA scheme. Without SNA support, many students would be unable to attend school. The scheme provides sufficient support to meet a student’s care needs but allows for this support to be faded over time in line with a student’s development. The scheme also facilitates maintained or increased levels of support where this is needed.

The NCSE initially sanctioned 10,985 SNA posts to schools for last September – the start of the current school year. Since then, over 165 posts have been allocated in response to needs which emerged during the year. There are now some 11,150 SNA posts in schools. More than two thirds of these (over 7,400 SNAs) are in mainstream class settings.

**Expansion in the SNA role?**

Members might recall that at the last meeting, I outlined that the role of the SNA had been informally expanded by some schools to include an educational remit. Some parents, schools and professionals consider that an SNA is allocated to help with literacy difficulties or to provide therapeutic support – such as speech and language therapy. Often, when SNA care support is being faded or withdrawn completely, a school might advise that they would like the SNA to do other work with a student such as improvement of language, literacy, numeracy and so on.

In the 14/15 school year, the NCSE processed 8,500 applications for SNA support. 3,000 or 35% did not come within the remit of the SNA scheme for these and other reasons. This is very worrying because each application raises expectations and hopes and when applications are declined, there can be disappointment, anxiety and anger; a belief that the NCSE is not doing its job properly or that “cuts” are the reason for non-allocation. This is not the case. In fact, the number of SNAs has increased by over 600 since 2013.

**Should we have teaching assistants?**

From time to time, there is the suggestion that the SNA role should be expanded to include the provision of additional educational support to students with special needs. The NCSE considers that the issue of whether or not to have teaching assistants is much broader than special education.

The conclusions of the research I referenced at our last meeting on the matter still remain relevant. These research studies raise serious concerns about the effectiveness of teaching assistant support for students with special educational needs. While finding some positive effects on teachers’ workload and stress levels, these studies found:

* The more support students received from teaching assistants the less progress they made in subjects such as english, maths and science.
* Students with special educational needs spent over a quarter of their school time away from mainstream class, their teachers and peers.
* They were almost constantly accompanied by a teacher assistant who bore the greatest portion of responsibility for planning and teaching them.
* Students can become overly dependent on teacher assistant support and socially isolated from other students.
* Despite the good intentions of teaching assistants, these students received a less appropriate and lower quality educational experience than other students.

I think all of us are striving to ensure that Irish students with special educational needs do not receive a less appropriate or lower quality educational experience. One US study noted that the substantial increase in teacher assistant use in US schools had taken place without any compelling evidence that it is ‘educationally sound to deploy the least qualified personnel to provide primary instruction to students with the most complex learning characteristics’.

On the other hand, research findings consistently demonstrate a strong relationship between quality of teaching and outcomes achieved by this group of students.

I re-circulated some extracts from various research literature for Member’s information.

**NCSE policy advice**

The NCSE has provided policy advice which takes on board the research findings and international best practice principles. The NCSE considers that there is insufficient evidence, at this point in time, to support the introduction of a new teaching assistant grade to work specifically with students with special educational needs. The research findings indicate that paraprofessionals can act as a barrier to a student’s access to the teacher and full participation in classroom activities, and that it is the quality of teaching which determines better educational outcomes.

**Conclusion**

While there is a very important role for the SNA in supporting the care needs of students, the NCSE believes that students with complex learning needs should be taught by fully qualified and experienced teachers equipped with the necessary skills to meet their needs. In our 2013 policy advice “*Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs”* the NCSE recognised the importance and centrality of the teacher in the education and care of all students, including students with special educational needs. Research findings consistently indicate that the quality of teachers and their teaching are the most important factors in determining educational outcomes for students with special needs.

Thank you

**Appendix 1 – Some Extracts from Various Research Literature**

**Importance of the Teacher in Student Learning**

There is consistent and significant evidence in the research literature to support the finding that the key factor contributing to students’ progress, including those students with complex needs, is access to experienced and qualified specialist teachers.

Student learning is influenced by many factors. The most solidly based finding is that the largest source of variation in student learning is attributable to differences in what students bring to school – their abilities and attitudes, and family and community background. Such factors are difficult for policy makers to influence, at least in the short-run.

The second broad conclusion is that of those variables which are potentially open to policy influence, factors to do with teachers and teaching are the most important influences on student learning. In particular, the broad consensus is that “teacher quality” is the single most important school variable influencing student achievement. *OECD 2005: Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*

Another study showed that the provision of additional resources to students – such as support from teaching assistants – did not ensure good quality intervention or adequate progress by pupils. There was a misconception that provision of additional resources was the key requirement for individual pupils, whereas the study findings showed that key factors for good progress were: the involvement of a specialist teacher; good assessment; work tailored to challenge pupils sufficiently; and commitment from school leaders to ensure good progress for all pupils.

*Ofsted 2006: does it matter where students are taught?*

An international literature review quotes many studies showing that teachers play an essential role in quality education. Savolainen (2009) quotes McKinsey and Company who say: ‘*the quality of an education system cannot* *exceed the quality of its teachers*’.

Other studies suggest (e.g. Sanders and Horn, 1998; Bailleul et al., 2008) that the quality of the teacher contributes more to learner achievement than any other factor, including class size, class composition, or background. The need for ‘high quality’ teachers equipped to meet the needs of all learners becomes evident to provide not only equal opportunities for all, but also education for an inclusive society. Reynolds (2009) says that it is the knowledge, beliefs and values of the teacher that are brought to bear in creating an effective learning environment for pupils, making the teacher a critical influence in education for inclusion and the development of the inclusive school. Cardona (2009) notes that concentration on initial teacher education ‘*… would seem to provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices*’.

*European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2010: Teacher education for inclusion: International Literature Review*

**Paraprofessional Support in the Classroom**

Over the last few years there has been considerable discussion and commentary in Ireland, as elsewhere, on provision of additional support staff in classrooms. How educational support is provided in classrooms and the role of paraprofessionals in providing it, is a much broader issue than the issue of providing appropriate support for students with special educational needs. It is also an issue still widely debated in the research literature.

In 2009, the findings of a large scale study on the deployment and impact of support staff was published (Blatchford et al, 2009). The study covered primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales and was jointly funded by the UK and Welsh Governments.

The study found that the presence of support staff in the classroom had a positive effect on the teachers’ workload, job satisfaction and stress levels and the overall amount of individual attention given to students and on classroom control.However the study raised serious questions about how such support is deployed in schools.

It found that:

* Most support provided by teaching assistants was for low ability/students with special educational needs and that in many cases these students were routinely taught for much of their time by teaching assistants and not by teachers.
* The more contact students had with support staff the less individual attention they had from teachers.
* The more support students received the less progress they made in subjects such as English, maths and science.

This study highlighted the importance of ensuring that extra support must be well organised and structured, particularly given that lower attaining students are more likely to receive such additional support.

A more recent study published in 2013 (*Making a Statement Project*) compared the experiences of 48 students with special educational needs to that of 151 average attaining control students (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). The findings indicate that students with special educational needs spent over a quarter of their school time away from mainstream class, their teachers and peers and that they were almost constantly accompanied by a teacher assistant. The study also found that teacher assistants bore the greatest portion of responsibility for planning and teaching for students with special educational needs. The authors concluded that while the efforts of teacher assistants were well intentioned, the students with special educational needs received a less appropriate and lower quality educational experience compared to their average attaining peers.

In contrast, an earlier discussion paper was published in 2010 (Farrell et al, 2010) on the key find­ings from one aspect of a systematic review of the literature carried out by the Inclusion Review Group at Manchester University on the impact of teaching assistants (or their equivalent) on improving pupils’ academic achievement. Findings here indicated that academic achievements of primary aged students improved significantly where the curric­ular intervention from trained teaching assistants is targeted and directed at identified difficulties in learning, typically in literacy. Findings were more equivocal where support is more general and not directed at students with identified difficulties.

A 2007 US study noted that the substantial increase in teacher assistant use in US schools to support students with disabilities over the previous 20 years (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007) had taken place without any compelling evidence that it is ‘educationally sound to deploy the least qualified personnel to provide primary instruction to students with the most complex learning characteristics’. The authors cautioned countries that had not yet adopted teacher assistant support to be cognisant of problems already experienced by countries which had done so.

In summary, research studies point to considerable reservations concerning the role of support staff in the classroom for students with special educational needs and they are equivocal about the effectiveness of this support (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Blatchford et al, 2009; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Findings indicate that paraprofessional support can inadvertently result in:

* Students with special educational needs having less teacher involvement in their learning.
* Becoming overly dependent on such support.
* Being socially isolated from other students.
* Such support does not necessarily improve their academic outcomes.

These findings lend support to the conclusion of the DES *Value for Money and Policy Review* that the weight of educational research suggests it is inappropriate to delegate educational instruction to support staff and that such delegation would represent an unacceptable departure from the role of the SNA as outlined in DES circulars**.**

Given the growing international evidence that paraprofessionals can act as a barrier to a student’s access to the teacher and full participation in classroom activities, and that it is the quality of teaching which determines better educational outcomes, the NCSE advised in our policy advice paper “Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools” that there was insufficient evidence, at this point in time, to support the introduction of a new teaching assistant grade to work exclusively with students with special educational needs. Instead research findings consistently demonstrate a strong relationship between quality of teaching and outcomes achieved by this group of students.

The NCSE believes that students with complex learning needs should be taught by fully qualified and experienced teachers equipped with the necessary skills to meet their needs. How educational support is to be provided in classrooms for all students and the role of paraprofessionals in providing that support is a much broader issue that applies to all students and not only to students with special educational needs. The NCSE advised that the full educational requirements of students with special educational needs should be met by providing schools with sufficient fully qualified teachers but that additional care support should continue to be allocated 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.