

## **ASTI SUBMISSION March 2019**

### **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills**

#### **Special Educational Needs: Planning and July provision**

##### **Introduction**

The ASTI appreciates this opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee. Inclusive education is a foundational pillar of Irish education policy. Teachers have been to the forefront for many decades in advocating for inclusive schools and for adequate investment in schools to support inclusion. The ASTI has consistently supported the goal of inclusive education while at the same time drawing attention to ongoing challenges to meet that goal. That is why we welcome this opportunity to communicate some of our latter concerns to the Joint Committee.

##### **Inclusive education**

The Education for Persons Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 states that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who have no such needs. The National Council for Special Education defines inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners. It involves removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her schooling. In line with inclusive principles, schools are advised to include students meaningfully in mainstream mixed-ability class groupings. This helps ensure high expectations and enables students with special educational needs to learn alongside their peers. Mixed-ability teaching has beneficial effects for all students and helps promote social and personal development.

A dimension of inclusive education that is frequently under-estimated is its prevalence in the student population. In 2006, the NCSE estimated that up to 18 per cent of the school-going population may have a special educational need, as defined under the EPSEN Act. In 2011 an ESRI study pointed to evidence of an overall prevalence rate of 25 per cent. This estimation of 18% to 25% is in line with international research and reflects broader societal changes towards more inclusive and equal societies.

##### **New model to support inclusion**

In September 2017, a new model of allocation of teachers for students with additional and special educational needs commenced in second-level schools in tandem with revised Departmental guidelines for supporting students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The increased investment in inclusive education which the model represents was welcomed by the ASTI. However, its roll-out to schools was not supported by a training programme for mainstream classroom teachers on appropriate pedagogies for

meaningful inclusion in the classroom. Moreover, teachers were not provided with training on how to engage in educational planning for students with special educational needs. Departmental Circular 14/2017 further states that in utilising the additional teaching resources provided to schools, coordination time be kept to a minimum.

### **Educational planning for students with special educational needs**

The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act, 2004 includes a requirement for schools to provide an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students with special needs. However, this section of the EPSEN Act has not been commenced, as was confirmed by the Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh in a statement to the Dáil. (December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018) As more and more students are educated in mainstream settings, teachers have adapted their classroom planning practices to ensure that needs of all students are met. Their pedagogy has changed accordingly and includes a wider range of formative assessment approaches to support students' learning. The introduction of Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes with the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 have ensured that suitable curriculum are now available for students with more challenging needs, including Down Syndrome students.

All of the above positive developments have taken place without recourse to overly bureaucratic approaches inherent in IEP planning models. The ASTI issued advice to its members in December 2018 not to engage with such models or equivalents until such time as appropriate training and dedicated planning time is provided for teachers. IEPs are complex and technical documents which require specialist knowledge of the diverse range of special education needs. They also require each teacher to collaborate with each students' other teachers (approx. 8-10 per year group) for the purpose of the plan. Given the prevalence of special educational needs among the student population, up to 25% of the cohort, this means that a classroom teacher – who typically teaches 250 students in any given week of a school year – can have up 60-plus students with special education needs. Mountains of paper work aside, IEPs require the classroom teacher to have a level of knowledge of special needs education which only specialised training can provide.

At the same time, the ASTI has advised its members that existing arrangements for the education of students with special education needs, including classroom planning, pedagogical approaches and formative assessment practice will not be impacted.

### **Supporting the teaching profession**

Inclusive education has been a success story in Irish schools. At the same time, it is clear that additional supports must be provided to teachers to ensure an equitable and quality education for all. The ASTI has already written to the Department of Education and Skills for meetings to discuss the outstanding challenges in the area of inclusive education. They include:

- 1) Need for national training programme on planning for students with special educational needs for all classroom teachers
- 2) Need for dedicated time for classroom teachers to engage in planning for students with special educational needs

- 3) Need for dedicated co-ordination time for whole-school coordination for special educational needs
- 4) Need to restore the allowance previously provided to teachers who qualified as special education teachers

### **July Education Programme**

The Department of Education and Skills provides funding for an extended school year for children with a severe or profound general learning disability or children with autism. The extended year is more commonly known as July Provision or the July Education Programme. Where school-based provision is not feasible, home-based provision may be granted. Where an eligible school participates in the programme, an extra month's education is provided to a pupil who meets the scheme's criteria. Where school-based provision is not feasible, 40 hours home-based provision may be grant aided. From the ASTI's perspective, this programme is much appreciated by parents and students. However, it would appear that some families face difficulties in sourcing a suitable tutor who must be a registered teacher. The ASTI would strongly recommend that the Department of Education and Skills engage with the relevant education stakeholders to seek a better model of accessing appropriately qualified tutors.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers will always want the best for their students. The professionalism and commitment of second-level teachers in Ireland to their students is acknowledged internationally and borne out by international research on students' performance as well as their satisfaction with their lives. The ASTI is committed to the goal of inclusive education but must insist that the teaching profession is adequately supported to achieve this goal for all students.