

ASTI Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection

on

The Role of Special Needs Assistants in Post Primary Schools

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection in preparation of its forthcoming report on the role of Special Needs Assistants. The Joint Committee will be aware of the ongoing discussions between the Department of Education & Skills and the stakeholders on the proposed new model for allocating teaching resources for students with special educational needs. (1) The latter has been developed by the National Council for Special Education – NCSE - in order to ensure a fairer and more effective allocation of additional teaching resources to schools. It would be important for the Joint Committee to consider the implications of this new model in its review of the role of SNAs.

Role of SNA at present

The role of the SNA is very clearly laid out in the 2014 Departmental Circular which clarifies the purpose of the SNA scheme. This Circular confirms the latter as “*providing schools with additional support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs*”. It notes that the 2011 Departmental Value for Money Review and Policy Review of SNA scheme found that the purpose of the scheme is generally not well understood within schools or by parents. It notes that the deployment of SNAs in schools has moved away from its primary care function to SNA involvement in behavioural, therapeutic, pedagogic and administrative tasks. This conclusion in the Departmental Review raises several issues of concern. In the first instance, we have to ask why the role of the SNA has become so extended and secondly, we need to ask what are the most effective supports for ensuring educational progress for SEN students.

Why has their role expanded?

The reason why the role of the SNA has expanded to that of a para-professional is simply because schools do not sufficient human resources to meet their social and legal requirements for inclusion. The baseline data is that between 18% and 25% of the cohort will have special educational needs as defined in the EPSEN Act, 20014. (2) Schools are committed to providing an inclusive education for all students. However, they have not been in any manner adequately resourced to fulfil this role. The dysfunctionalities and deficiencies in the current system for allocating resources to support SEN students is well-documented in the aforementioned NCSE report. In this context, it is understandable that schools have deployed the additional resource of Special Needs Assistant beyond the prescribed role. This *resource-maximisation* approach is the only option available to school principals facing the challenges of sustained increases in student enrolment and, since 2008, extensive cutbacks in educational funding – in particular, a reduction in the pupil:teacher ratio in 2009 and successive reductions in the quantum of additional teacher supports allocated to SEN students.

What are the most effective resources to support SEN students' educational progress?

Given that schools clearly need additional human resources, what are the most effective resources in terms of promoting the educational outcomes of SEN students? The research evidence is absolutely unequivocal that the single most important school factor influencing the learning outcomes of all students is the quality of their teachers. Students with special educational needs in addition need specialist teachers who have both experience and expertise to make the appropriate interventions to ensure educational progress. There is a substantial body of research which demonstrates that, while para-professionals such as SNAs can have a positive impact on the teachers' workload and stress levels, the provision of this form of support does not necessarily ensure improved learning outcomes for SEN students. Indeed, some of the most conclusive research demonstrates that the deployment of para-professionals as teaching support results in SEN students having *less* teacher involvement in their learning and reduced participation in classroom activities. (3)

There is also strong evidence that over-dependence on para-professionals, frequently resulting in withdrawal from mainstream classes, hinders social relationships with their non-SEN peers and that this is particularly the case for adolescents. (4) In summary, the research evidence demonstrates that the most effective resource to support SEN students' educational progress is consistent access to qualified and experienced teachers who have expertise in teaching students with complex learning and developmental needs; who can provide good assessment of students' progress; who differentiate their teaching to ensure student understanding and classroom participation and who can guide teacher colleagues in best classroom practice.

Improving non-teaching supports for SEN students

Schools are dynamic communities in which context has a profound influence on actual work practices. Over the years, SNAs have gained much experience in working with young people in a variety of situations which require not just a physical care response, but also behavioural and therapeutic responses. In many schools, they have become valued members of staff in terms of the various roles that they perform. It does not make sense to seek to limit these roles when it is quite clear that the demand for such roles is growing rather than decreasing because of the growth in enrolment across the system and the acknowledged prevalence rate of up to 25%. It would make more economic sense for the Department of Education & Skills to examine a career progression structure for SNAs, based on progression from FETAC Level 5, so that there is a continuum of non-teaching duties which they can perform in schools and classrooms.

Special Education Needs and Educational Disadvantage

Recent Irish research confirms the strong relationship between the prevalence of some categories of special educational need – in particular emotional and behavioural disorders and learning difficulties - and levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Children from working class backgrounds, especially boys, are more likely to be identified as having SEN. The allocation of SNAs to schools for students with emotional and behavioural disorders is tightly circumscribed in the current Departmental Circular. It requires that the Continuum of Support Model must be fully deployed and only in those circumstances where behaviour management strategies have not been successful to date can a school employ an SNA to assist. In an ideal world of early intervention supports and well-resourced mental health services for young people, this strict application of criteria would be acceptable.

However, in the resource-poor environments that schools have to contend with, the availability of an experienced SNA can make a huge difference in terms of a school's capacity to respond to the immediate needs of troubled young people. In this context, given that the National Behaviour Support Service is part of the Inclusion Support Service under the NCSE, it would make sense to examine how the role of the SNA can be developed to provide practical supports to schools and students.

- (1) *Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A Better and More Equitable Way*, NCSE 2014
- (2) *Prevalence of Special Educational Needs*, NCSE Research Report No.9 2011
- (3) *Making a Statement Report*, R Webster & P Blatchford 2013
- (4) *"Encouraging Voices"* Project, M Shevlin & R Rose 2003
- (5) *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools*, NCSE 2013