

ASTI submission

to

Special Oireachtas Committee on Autism

5th July, 2022

Introduction

The ASTI appreciates this opportunity to submit its views on the issues which need to be addressed to meet the needs of students with special educational needs, including ASD students, in second-level schools. Engaging with, and listening to the voice and experience of the professional educators, is a vital dimension of good educational policy-making. The ASTI considers that we are at an important juncture in terms of a step-change in the Irish state's delivery of its commitments following its ratification in 2018 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD). The progressive Resolutions adopted by Dáil Eireann in April 2019 and 2021 demonstrate the widespread public demand for progress on meeting the needs of persons with autism, a demand which extends to all persons with disabilities. The commitment to implementation of the Autism Innovation Strategy, launched earlier this year, underlines this positive turn in government policy.

Note: This submission does not attempt to address the many complex issues in education policy in relation to inclusion. Rather, it addresses the relevant key issues in the Committee's request for submissions.

Access to education

Access to education is fundamental to realising the right to education. Currently, according to the Office of Children's Ombudsman (OCO), there are 270 autistic children who do not have an appropriate school place for the next school year in September. A further 15,500 children travel outside of their locality each day to attend specialist provision, another 1,455 students are in receipt of Home Tuition as a result of the lack of specialised placements.¹ This is a recurrent problem in the system. The OCO's Report notes that the DE has stated that its planning is hampered, in part, by parental choice regarding their child's education setting. The OCO has observed that where a child has a diagnosis and recommendation for a specialist placement and a parent wishes to exercise that option, the system lags in its response, and for many children who live in provision 'black spots', most notably Dublin and Cork, the system fails in its response. Clearly, without proactive capacity building at a local level, utilising the real-time data such as that deployed in the new identification model for DEIS schools, this situation is set to deteriorate further with future pressure on school provision expected to be concentrated in and around Metropolitan Areas at both primary and post-primary level.²

Secondly, the ASTI is concerned about the emerging narrative that schools are reluctant to enrol SEN students, including ASD students. Some of the commentary – media and political – around the decision of the Cabinet to approve the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Bill 2022 last week, which aims to compel schools to open special classes within six to eight weeks (the existing process can take up to 18 months) has been misplaced. Schools are highly regulated institutions, at both legislative and policy levels, and decisions in relation to admission must comply with both. Capacity is also essential: if a school does not have, for example, a dedicated sensory room for ASD students and is already over-crowded, the Board of Management may consider that it simply does not have the capacity to meet specific needs. The solution to such a situation lies with the DE which should respond with additional financing within very short time frames: the rapid allocation of additional resources to schools during the pandemic and, more recently, the sudden

¹ <https://www.oco.ie/news/plan-for-places-oco-report-highlights-need-for-a-dequate-forward-planning-to-ensure-children-with-sen-receive-equal-access-to-education/>

² <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/220043/d6b98002-a904-427f-b48a-0fa0af756ea7.pdf#page=null>

arrival of almost 7,000 Ukrainian students proves that the DE can respond efficiently and effectively when necessary.

Thirdly, the ASTI believes that such a narrative deflects attention from the wider contextual issues of social infrastructure failing to keep up with a developer-led market-based model of housing provision. The consequent lack of sufficient number of school places is familiar to members of the Oireachtas, many of whom routinely raise this issue in the Dáil. The current housing crisis is impacting on all aspects of our society, not least the education system which is facing a prolonged teacher supply problem, driven in part by the unaffordability of accommodation – rented or privately owned – in most urban areas.

Recommendation: Access to a school place is fundamental to any ambition for inclusive education. The former is dependant on investment in school buildings and facilities: it is unfair to attribute blame on schools for infrastructural and human resource decision made at central level.

Access to assessment and intervention

Delays in access to assessment and intervention continue to undermine the right to an inclusive education of ESD students. Currently, there approximately 4,000 children await a diagnostic assessment to get a school place. From the ASTI's perspective, these delays are primarily attributable to a failure by the state to adequately invest in public services as well as to inadequate workforce planning to anticipate current and future need.[1] Across many sectors, workload, burnout, high levels of staff turnover are having hugely detrimental impact on service delivery. It is of note that a common thread of the analysis provided in the OCO Report is that of failure to plan resulting in a mismatch between need and actual provision. This has resulted in waiting times for both assessments and services as 'now intolerable'. [2] As noted in the Dáil debate on 29th April, 2021, the HSE confirmed an average 19-month waiting time for an assessment – in direct contravention of the legal requirements under the Disability Act 2005 which stipulates that such assessments be commenced within three months and completed within six months. Shockingly, less than 10% of assessments are carried out within the statutory time-frame.[3] Many families have to resort to paying for private assessments which can cost several hundred euro: moreover, as also noted in the Dáil debate of April 2021, due to Ireland's two-tier health service, families from more disadvantaged backgrounds, or without the financial resources, cannot access timely intervention, which is leading to increased levels of stress and difficulties for families of children with autism. Immediate steps must be taken to extend access to assessment services via the National Educational Psychological Service and the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments. It is of note that that latter was introduced an 'an interim' measure in 2007, underlining the need for a review of the overall psychological service for schools. Given that the prevalence of SEN in the student population is estimated at 25%, the latter is imperative to ensure timely and effective assessment and intervention responses.

Recommendation: Immediate steps must be taken to extend access to assessment services via the National Educational Psychological Service and the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments. A review of overall psychological service should be undertaken, given sustained growth in population and a SEN prevalence rate of 25%.

Inclusive education for all

Notwithstanding the current focus on school places and waiting lists for assessments, there are many strengths in our education system which need to be stated. Only 2% of SEN students are educated in separate facilities. The Framework for Junior Cycle, introduced in 2015, has ensured that differentiated and appropriate curriculum is available for SEN students. The Inspectorate has a dedicated evaluation of provision for special educational needs in schools which focuses on learning outcomes, resource deployment and structures and systems in place to meet the goal of inclusive education.

This evaluation model was introduced following major changes to the allocation process of additional Special Education Teachers (SET) – formerly called resource/learning support teachers – to schools. This model removed the obligation for an assessment of need in order to receive additional teaching supports. (Prior to 2017, students with less complex needs such as dyslexia, could not get additional support without an assessment: students with complex needs, such as ASD, continue to have provision based on assessment.) It also marked a move away from the practice of withdrawing students from mainstream classes to one where the SET teacher co-teaches with the subject teacher in the classroom. Ideally, this should have brought about a culture change in school. However, as noted in the Chief Inspector’s Report 2016-2020, this has not occurred to the degree envisaged.³ Specifically, the latter identified the need for an induction programme for SET teachers as well as support for teacher collaboration and usage of assessment data in developing plans for SEN students. This is not an unexpected finding as no national training programme accompanied the introduction of the new allocation model in 2017 despite the demand for same from teachers and school principals. Another debilitating feature of the introduction of the new model was the lack of a dedicated allocation of teaching time for SEN co-ordination activities.

Both of these ‘omissions’ in implementation policy continue to negatively impact on overall SEN provision as highlighted in Red C research commissioned by ASTI in 2019.⁴ Several findings confirm the need to focus on providing resources for coordination and teacher upskilling:

- Only 16% of Assistant Principals had a SEN coordination role
- Only 5% of mainstream teachers have a SEN qualification
- 40% of SET teachers do not have a SEN qualification
- 68% respondents stated that smaller classes were essential to meet SEN needs

The ASTI has consistently communicated to the DE that a dedicated post requires to be established in all schools to ensure that the many complex and time-consuming tasks, not least liaison with parents, external services, subject teachers and pastoral care leaders, are effectively discharged.

Recommendation: A national CPD programme must be provided and all school should have a dedicated post for SEN coordination.

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/611873-chief-inspector-reports/>

⁴ <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/achieving-inclusive-schools-the-teachers-perspective-april-2019/>

Concluding observations

The ASTI is committed to inclusive education and believes that it is the model most consonant with the needs of children and young people and wider social inclusion goals. The UN CRPD requires Ireland to move towards an inclusive education system which will require continued investment in schools, in the teaching profession, in assessment and intervention, and in school leadership. Education policy should regard inclusion as a process rather than a fixed outcome. Concepts of rights and duty bearers will continue to evolve in democratic society and education policy must be proactive in ensuring effective 'fits' between desired outcomes and implementation strategies on the ground. From the ASTI's perspective, the most important resource in the school system is the teaching profession. Supporting the profession requires sustainable workloads, good working conditions – including equal pay for equal work, resourced in-school management structures, and supports for CPD.