

Why Change how Additional Teaching Resources are Allocated to Schools?

This article describes the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) proposal for the new model for allocating additional teaching supports for students with special educational needs in schools. It is based on a NCSE Working Group Report, 'Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs' published in March 2014. This proposal for a new model was based on comprehensive research evidence and followed extensive consultations with stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, educational psychologists, SNAs, school management bodies, teacher unions, officials from Government departments, advocacy groups and so on. This article summarises the proposals and readers are referred to the original report for a complete list of references and a full description of the consultation process.

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs; Additional teaching allocations; school profile*

MARY BYRNE is Head of Special Education at NCSE where her main responsibility, in consultation with Council and other education stakeholders, is to prepare evidence-informed policy advice papers for approval by Council and subsequent submission to the Minister for Education and Skills. Before her appointment to the Council, she held the post of Senior Lecturer in Special Education at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, Dublin where she worked from 1994-2008.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the NCSE published wide-ranging advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on how students with special educational needs should be supported in schools (NCSE, 2013). The paper contained twenty-eight recommendations designed to bring about improved outcomes for students with special educational needs in the school system.

The NCSE advised the Minister that the existing model for allocating over 10,000 additional learning support and resource teacher posts to schools was inequitable at best and potentially confirmed social advantage and reinforced social disadvantage. Pending the full implementation of the Education for Persons

with Disability (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), a better way had to be found to allocate these additional teaching supports to schools.

One of the paper's key recommendations was that additional teaching allocations should be based on the profiled needs of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability. This profile should take into account students' educational needs to be addressed by the school, based on a number of different factors as described later in this article. The NCSE did not recommend such change lightly.

The NCSE was aware that any proposal to change the existing teaching allocation model had the potential to cause considerable anxiety among schools, parents and stakeholders, particularly at a time of economic recession when there was a risk that such proposals could be interpreted as a mechanism to cut resources. There were, however, compelling and unavoidable reasons to propose change.

SO WHY DID NCSE PROPOSE CHANGE?

The existing system was inequitable and could be wasteful of resources.

All mainstream schools were allocated additional learning support teachers to assist students with learning difficulties, on the basis of enrolment (post-primary) or number of class teachers (primary). However, the level of students' need for learning support could differ greatly from school to school and the existing allocation system was unable to reflect this variation. So for example, two primary schools, each with an enrolment of 250 students, received the same level of learning support teaching regardless of the actual number of students in either school that required this support. It was neither equitable nor effective to allocate additional state resources without any reference to actual levels of educational need within schools.

The existing allocation of resource teachers was dependent on a diagnosis of disability which was not readily available and could result in the unnecessary labelling of children.

In the Irish system, a formal diagnosis of disability was required before resource teaching support was sanctioned for individual students. Schools had to submit professional reports, stating the diagnosis, along with individual applications for additional teaching support. The NCSE was aware that many students were on long waiting lists for a professional diagnosis of disability. While on the waiting list, resource teaching support could not be provided to their school on their behalf – even where there was a clear need for such support. The NCSE considered that additional special educational teaching support should not be postponed because of delayed access to diagnostic services.

Through the consultation process professionals told the NCSE that they felt obliged under the existing system to undertake assessments simply to ensure that the school got additional resource teaching hours. This created a real risk that students were diagnosed as having special educational needs for resource allocation purposes rather than because such a diagnosis was required for health or other reasons. Professionals also pointed out that in these cases, the clinical time spent diagnosing a disability could be better used to provide necessary professional treatment, intervention and therapeutic support for the student.

The existing system disadvantaged students from less financially well-off families.

Some parents (or schools) paid large sums of money for private assessments and where eligible, these students could immediately access additional teaching resources. Access to additional State educational resources should be equitable and should not depend on a family's ability to pay for diagnostic services. The existing system could therefore reinforce disadvantage because children from less financially well-off families had to wait longer for access to public diagnostic services and supports in schools.

The existing system failed to recognise individual differences.

While it may seem fair that every student within the same category of disability gets the same level of resource teaching support, irrespective of age or ability, in fact it is not. A diagnosis of disability, of itself, does not necessarily inform the level of need for additional teaching support as within the same category of disability, students may have very different needs for support. For example, one student with a physical disability may have very significant mobility and other difficulties and need a lot of extra help at school, where another student may use a wheelchair but otherwise may have very little need for resource teaching support. Research findings were clear that allocation should be based on assessed need rather than disability category.

Post-primary allocations for students with less complex special educational needs were based on data which was well out of date.

Additional teaching allocations to post-primary schools for students with high incidence special educational needs¹ were based on 2011 data - many of these students would now have left school. This data was out of date and didn't take account of new entrants or demographic changes that have taken place over the

¹. Mild general learning disability, borderline mild general learning disability and specific learning disability

last six school years. This situation could not be allowed to continue as it was potentially unfair to schools and students.

The existing system was not linked to improved educational outcomes.

Under the existing model, there was no systematic attempt to assess or monitor outcomes achieved by students who access additional resources. It was therefore very difficult to evaluate the impact, if any, that the additional support was having or whether it was the appropriate support to enable the student to achieve his/her individual potential.

Upon receipt of NCSE advice in May 2013, the Minister acknowledged the potential for improvement and requested the NCSE to set up a working group to develop a proposal for a better way to allocate additional teaching supports. Mr. Eamon Stack, Chairperson of the NCSE, was appointed to chair the working group.

WHAT DID THE NCSE WORKING GROUP PROPOSE?

The NCSE working group published its report in March 2014 (NCSE, 2014) and proposed a new model for allocating additional teaching supports which broke the link between the allocation of additional teaching resources and professional diagnosis of disability. The working group strongly reiterated its support for individualised assessments (and clinical diagnosis, where required) for students with special educational needs. However the purpose of such assessment should be to identify students' strengths and learning needs to inform their teaching and learning plan, rather than being sought purely to obtain additional resources for students.

The model proposed by the working group comprised the following elements:

1. Additional teaching supports allocated on the profiled needs of a school

The NCSE working group proposed that learning support and resource teaching be combined into one simple integrated scheme to support students with special educational needs. The vast majority of the by then 12,000+ additional resource and learning support teachers should be allocated to schools on the basis of educational need, i.e. for those students for whom the supports are intended, and without the need for professional diagnosis of disability.

Based on consultation with stakeholders and national and international research, the working group identified a set of clear criteria to indicate a school's need for additional teaching resources. These include the:

- Number of enrolled students with very complex special educational needs
- Overall levels of academic achievement - i.e. the percentages of students performing below a certain threshold on standardised test results
- The school's socio-economic context.

Weightings should be attributed to these criteria, with the highest weighting assigned for students with complex needs, then to the results of standardised tests, and then to the social context of the school. These criteria and the reasons for including them are outlined in depth in the full working group report.

In order that every school is in a position to admit students with special educational needs, the working group proposed that around 15% of available posts (baseline allocation) should be allocated based on overall enrolment. In circumstances where all these additional teaching hours are not required to support students with special educational needs, schools can use them instead to facilitate prevention and early intervention programmes for those who require them.

A school's additional teaching allocation under the new model is calculated by combining the baseline and school profile elements together. The working group has proposed an entirely new and different model and not simply a revision of the old model so comparing allocations under the current model (learning support and NCSE low incidence allocations) to the new model won't provide an accurate assessment of what the school is likely to receive.

Additional teaching supports will be left in place initially for a two-year period, which could be extended to three years as the new model becomes embedded in the system. This gives schools greater stability in terms of their staffing levels and allows them to plan ahead with more confidence.

2. Support for schools in utilising additional teaching resources

The working group recognised that schools must be supported to implement the new model. They proposed that guidelines be developed to assist schools to:

- identify students requiring additional support
- develop appropriate goals for students receiving support and to monitor and record outcomes
- use and deploy additional teaching posts to best effect.

Schools will also continue to receive support from educational psychologists through the National Educational Psychological Service's Continuum of Support model. Finally, some of the existing educational support services should be combined into a single Support Service for schools, namely:

- The Visiting Teacher Service for Students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and /or Blind/Visually Impaired
- The Special Education Support Service
- The National Behaviour Support Service

3. Establishment of an NCSE Support Service

The NCSE previously highlighted the need for cohesion across existing advisory and intervention supports services for schools, which are currently provided by a number of different bodies and organisations (NCSE, 2013). Furthermore, the NCSE support service must be in a position to respond and offer support to schools where very exceptional and totally unforeseeable circumstances arise between profiling periods. Such circumstances might include a very large number of students with complex needs enrolling in the school in a given year.

The role of the NCSE support service is intended to focus on building professional capacity in schools and supporting schools to respond to exceptional circumstances. Such additional support could take the form of out-reach teaching support, promotion of inclusive teaching methodologies or development of effective assessment and planning strategies. There could also be a facility for schools to apply to the NCSE for support, where required, to meet the needs of students with extremely challenging behaviour, who are receiving support at the level of School Support Plus in the NEPS Continuum of Support.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW MODEL?

The working group was confident that if accepted, the proposed new model would generate a better and more equitable resource allocation system with tangible benefits for students with special educational needs and for their schools. It addresses fundamental flaws identified in the old system by tailoring resources to educational need, breaking the link that makes diagnosis a prerequisite for resource allocation and placing greater emphasis on monitoring educational outcomes.

As teaching supports will be available on enrolment, students will have timely access to the support they require, rather than having to await a professional diagnosis. Parents will no longer have to pay for private assessments for their children to access additional necessary supports in schools. Students will no longer have to receive a lifelong label (sometimes from an early age) to trigger access to necessary support. They will continue to have access to prevention and early intervention programmes to minimise the potential for the emergence

of learning difficulties. Schools will be enabled to provide the greatest level of teaching support to students with the greatest need. The deployment of additional teaching supports will link with student learning plans so their individual learning needs can be identified and addressed and the impact of interventions on learning outcomes can be assessed.

Schools will have a greater measure of certainty on resourcing which will enable them to invest in building teams of qualified and experienced teachers to work with students with special educational needs. They will no longer have to make individual applications for student support which will eliminate the cumbersome school application process. The professional assessment process will focus on the identification of learning needs rather than on diagnosis for the purpose of resource allocation. Over time this will increase the professional time available for teaching and learning and for working with students and where necessary, their families.

While generally the proposed new model received substantial positive support from stakeholders, various reservations were expressed by different groups. Some parents and schools were concerned that any proposal for a new model would simply be used as a means to deliver savings to the Exchequer rather than as part of a process of incremental improvement in responding to students with special educational needs. This was never the case as the Minister's request to the NCSE working group was clear – the group was to develop a proposal for a better way to allocate available resources. The working group was clear that there was never any intention that this would bring about a reduction in the overall level of additional resources available.

Through the consultation process, some schools expressed concern that a new model could result in an additional administrative burden resulting in less teaching time for students. However, it is very clear that the proposals are actually focussed on reducing the level of bureaucracy for schools as:

- Schools will no longer have to submit individual applications on behalf of students and
- The paper states that any recording or reporting by schools should be kept administratively simple so as not to add to schools' administrative load.

While confident that the proposed model was a better and more equitable means of allocating available additional teaching resources to schools, the working group acknowledged that it will bring about changes in schools. It strongly recommended that sufficient time be allowed for further consultation with stakeholders to build confidence that the new system will be equitable, transparent and efficient in

delivering resources to students with special educational needs. It advised that any changes to the level of teaching supports allocated to individual schools must be properly managed and that it may be necessary to consider transitional arrangements where required.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE NCSE WORKING GROUP'S PROPOSAL?

On 10th February 2015, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan T.D., announced, with immediate effect, the establishment of a new Support Service within the National Council for Special Education, to assist schools in supporting children with special educational needs. Since that time, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and NCSE have been working in cooperation with the three services named above, to effect a seamless transfer of services while maintaining the same level of services to schools on an ongoing basis. On March 20th 2017 the management of the three services transferred to the NCSE.

Following discussion with the education partners, the DES completed a one year pilot of the new model of allocation over 2015-2016 and forty-seven schools participated. The DES developed guidelines to prepare pilot schools for the introduction of the new model and they received support from NEPS and the SESS over the course of the pilot. This support focussed on identifying and allocating supports to students with special educational needs and developing whole school approaches to inclusion. The DES Inspectorate conducted an evaluation of the pilot over the course of the 2015/16 school year (DES, 2016), which is available on the DES website.

Just over 80% of pilot schools elected to maintain their pilot allocations for the 2016/17 school year. Pilot schools referenced (DES, 2016):

- the benefit of the guidance received from support services and their ability to plan better, particularly for students who hadn't a disability diagnosis but clearly had additional needs
- the reduced administration overload in the 2015/16 school year which meant that schools did not have to complete applications for each new student accessing resource teaching support
- that involvement in the model had facilitated greater reflection and collaboration among teachers in relation to SEN.

Pilot schools also referenced challenges they experienced, including: a minority of teachers who felt they required further training in differentiation, target training and monitoring of student progress; and more than half the schools identified the need for greater coordination of special education (DES, 2016).

Following the DES evaluation of the pilot, the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, T.D. announced that the new model of allocation would be introduced for September 2017.

CONCLUSION

The NCSE remains confident that the proposed new model is a better and more equitable way of allocating additional teaching supports for students with special educational needs. We believe that the model promotes fairness and enables students to have access to necessary additional supports in school on enrolment. It provides flexibility for schools, while substantially eliminating the risks previously identified by the NCSE in relation to the old model. It allows teachers' professional judgment to be taken into account in the deployment of resources and has the potential to reduce the administrative burden on schools resources. For all of these reasons, we believe that, when fully implemented, the proposed model will promote improved outcomes for students with special educational needs.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Review of the Pilot of a New Model for Allocating Teaching Resources to Mainstream Schools to Support Pupils with Special Educational Needs*, Accessed on 8th April 2017 on the DES website at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Review-of-the-Pilot-of-a-New-Model-for-Allocating-Teaching-Resources-for-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs.pdf>

Government of Ireland (2004) *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

National Council for Special Education (2013), *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools*, Trim: NCSE.

National Council for Special Education (2014), *Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs: A Better and More Equitable Way*, Trim: NCSE

Copyright of Reach is the property of Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.