

# Parental Perspective on the New Model for Allocation of Additional Teaching Supports for Students in Mainstream Schools

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As a parent representative organisation, we have consistently advocated for needs driven systems that are more responsive to individual children's needs. While we welcome the new model, some parents have argued that we should simply add more diagnoses to the list of low incidence disabilities to open up more access to resource teaching hours. This argument comes from a need for security expressed by parents in knowing that the allocation of hours is diagnosis-based as per Circular 02/05 (DES, 2005). The issues with this solution are that tomorrow another parent will find that their child does not meet the criteria for resource hours, despite presenting with significant learning needs, and that this revised model does not address the varying needs of children with the same diagnosis.

There are concerns over teachers' preparedness to assess the learning needs of students and the level of additional training undertaken in relation to special educational needs (SEN). Parents' perceptions are that the responsibility to assess children shifts from health professionals to teachers who may not have the skills to assess their children. However, teachers do have educational assessment tools and more informal methods of identifying if a child is struggling. The model does not preclude children from having an assessment or getting a diagnosis. It means that teachers no longer have to wait for the results of a health-related assessment before they can address a child's evident learning needs. Any additional reports from external professionals should be used to inform the learning plan for that child.

Removing the requirement for a diagnosis or reports from therapists in order to access additional teaching supports, will not negate the need for assessment and diagnosis to access other special educational supports such as Special Needs Assistants, State exam accommodations and language exemptions as well as enrolment criteria for more specialist educational settings. While all want the best outcomes for children, sometimes parents and schools have differed in what that looks like and this has led to breakdowns in communications and school placement. Parents are extremely concerned that the new model does not provide a mechanism other than following local complaints processes ending in a formal complaint to the Chairperson of the Board of Management if they dispute their child's plan and contact time with special education teachers. Some have also expressed the fear that teaching supports will be blocked as a punishment for complaining in cases where the parent school relationship has already broken down. Perhaps these issues should be dealt with in a broader discussion on school conflict avoidance and resolution, but we cannot ignore that it does happen.

Parents also have concerns over the capacity of the NCSE Support Service, NEPS and allied services from the HSE to scaffold the level of supports that schools will require to ensure successful outcomes for children, especially considering the upward demographic trends and increasing complexity of children's needs. The pilot schools for the new model had significant external support during the pilot which is unlikely to be replicated across the 3000 plus schools and this poses a potential risk.

What we all want to see is how the current allocation process, which is essentially a mathematical tool, translates into a new approach to address the needs of children with SEN. As parents, we need to reflect on the previous quantity based model where a child may have spent up to a fifth of the day with a Resource Teacher but the additional input may not have been reflected nor beneficial in the larger class context where the child spent the majority of their day. We need to start focusing on the school day as a whole where additional interventions are not viewed as the domain of the special education teacher, but this teacher has the expertise to support the class teacher in meeting the needs of the diverse profile of children in the classroom and to differentiate the curriculum accordingly.

There is and probably will always be a level of cynicism that any major changes introduced by the Department of Education and Skills has finance at the heart of it rather than children's best interests. This revised model is designed to address the individual needs of children and be more equitable as it reflects school profiles. It

will and should look different for everyone but will we have an effective way of measuring if this is indeed a better way?

## **REFERENCES**

Department of Education and Science (2005) *Special Education Circular SP ED 02/05*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

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*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

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