



INCLUSION IRELAND

**A Submission to the Department of Education and Skills:
on the allocation of resource teaching hours in schools.
September 2014.**

This document is in font 14 Verdana in line with Inclusion Ireland plain English guidelines.

Introduction

Inclusion Ireland is the national organisation advocating for the rights of people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland.

Established in 1961, our vision is of a society where people with intellectual disabilities live and participate in the community with equal rights as citizens. Our focus is on the core principles and values expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Inclusion Ireland welcomes the opportunity from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to make a submission on the future policy of resource teaching hours for children with special education needs.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recently published 'A better and more equitable way – Delivery for students with special education needs'. Inclusion Ireland made a submission into the formation of this advice, much of which was reflected in the final document. The policy advice from the NCSE to the DES was broadly welcomed by Inclusion Ireland.

Inclusion Ireland does have some concern with certain aspects of the NCSE advice to the DES. There is also a lack of fine detail on some important issues.

In forming this submission, Inclusion Ireland has consulted widely with parents who have children who will be affected by any new policy on the allocation of resource teaching hours in schools.

Reverse cuts to resource hours

Under the existing system children with any one of 14 certain diagnoses get a certain amount for resource teaching hours. In 2011, this allocation was reduced by 15%. This means that a child with autism has had their allocation of 5 hours cut to 4 hours 15 minutes.

With the improving economic position of the country, Inclusion Ireland calls for the restoration of resource hours that have been lost to each child with a low incidence disability since 2011. If the reversal of this cut does not occur before moving to a new system, these hours will be lost to children forever.

A new model of allocation

The move from a diagnostic model towards a need led allocation model is broadly welcomed. However, the NCSE policy advice does not contain the descriptors of needs that will determine the allocation of resource hours to each school and child. The needs descriptors that will underpin this new model of resource hour allocation must be robustly tested to ensure that certain groups of children do not fall through the cracks. For example: children with Down Syndrome, despite having complex educational needs do not qualify for a set allocation of hours under the current system. The new needs descriptors must be carefully considered to ensure no group of children with a particular disability have a difficulty accessing resource hours.

The NCSE proposal calls for a school to have their allocation of resource hours allocated based upon a small baseline to each school, the nature of the children in the school, the standard test scores in the school and the social context of the school. While this is a move in the right direction, it must be carefully managed. If not managed there is the potential for certain schools to attract large amounts of resources. This in turn could attract more students with special education needs to these enhanced resources. One parent expressed concern this “could limit choice on school placements if schools in disadvantaged areas were to attract large amounts resources”.

A below average score by a school in standardised testing will see a school attract additional resource teaching hours. From one perspective this makes sense but it could remove the incentive for a school to perform well in such testing. One focus group participant noted: “if I am a principal, what incentive is there for me to have a school that performs well in standardised testing as I am only going to lose supports”.

A number of parents expressed concern that standardised testing would not give a true reflection of their child. One parent of a child with autism noted “my son scores in the top 10% of children but he has significant educational deficits in other areas that are not picked up in standard testing. I fear his resource hours will be reduced to zero. At present they help him access and understand the curriculum”.

Another parent noted that a diagnosis at least pointed a teacher in the right direction for helping a child. Systems that are set around need can unwittingly “work well for the moderate child while children with a severe or mild condition lose out”.

In summary parents will be uneasy about the change until they see the new descriptors in operation and “how high the bar will be set for accessing services”.

Parents have expressed a fear that children with ‘high functioning’ or ‘mild’ autism may lose out on current support levels. This may have a knock on effect of schools being reluctant to enroll such pupils. There was a fear from parents that this would result in children who do not need to attend autism units having to attend such classes to get the appropriate support.

There was unease among parents that the loss of the diagnostic baseline that exists in the current model would lead to a gradual reduction in resource hours over time.

Moving to a needs led model does not diminish the education needs of children who currently qualify under the low incidence diagnosis model. Parents fear that the new model may see many of these children lose out.

While the shift to a needs led model is welcome it must be managed to ensure no cohort of children lose out on access to resource teaching hours.

A move towards the Education of Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004

The NCSE note that if their advice is accepted this will see a significant move towards the implementation of the EPSEN Act.

Parents that were consulted by Inclusion Ireland for this submission are weary of implementing the EPSEN Act unless it is fully resourced. The statutory right to an assessment under the Act is very welcome. However, assessments and individual education planning as set out in the Act must be appropriately resourced.

The following parent comment sums up how people feel: “Why would parents want the EPSEN Act implemented unless it is resourced properly?”

This NCSE advice contains a proposal for teachers and principals to apply the needs descriptors and thus allocate resources to each child. Inclusion Ireland believes that a fully funded implementation of the EPSEN Act would be a better option. Teachers have enough work in teaching children and do not need the possibility of parents canvassing for additional support for their child.

Inclusion Ireland calls for the government to publish a plan to properly fund and implement the EPSEN Act without delay.

Independent appeals

Inclusion Ireland agrees that people must always have access to an independent appeal mechanism and welcome the introduction of an independent appeal.

However, similar to other education appeals, the appeal described by the NCSE is very narrow in focus. A parent can only appeal if the school do not fully allocate the resource hours a child has been allocated. We recommend that a parent should be able to appeal if they believe that the (as yet unpublished or untried) needs descriptor has failed to pick up on their child's educational support needs. Such an appeal mechanism would be available under the EPSEN Act 2004.

Parents that were consulted by Inclusion Ireland noted that it would be difficult to obtain information on whether or not a child was getting their full allocation of support.

Parents also noted that it would be a brave parent to complain to a principal about the principals own actions "if you complain to the principal your child would only lose out further".

Parents also informed Inclusion Ireland that the Department of Education often fail to understand the "true meaning of independence" when it comes to appeals.

Inclusion Support Service

Some of the language in this section of the NCSE advice is not clear. It is unclear if this new service will be a merger of

current supports to schools such as the Behaviour Support Service, the National Educational Psychological Service and the Special Education Support Service. It is also unclear if a significant number of teachers currently working as resource teachers will be subsumed into this new service.

One parent asked: "why create a new body, isn't this work being done already?"

An Inclusion Support Service would be welcome if it is a merger of existing bodies and not another organisation for the education sector.

Some parents welcomed the development of an Inclusion Support Service. They pointed out that this service should have speech and language therapists among its staff.

Communication is the key to inclusion in life and education therefore it is logical that this service is staffed with speech and language therapists to support the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in Irish schools.

The NCSE must have the power to direct a school to enroll a child. This will bypass some of the 'soft barriers' that exist in school enrolment policies that are currently permitted.

The Inclusion Support Service should provide training for teachers. Currently, many teachers do not have any specific training in special education.

Conclusion

Inclusion Ireland and the parents that we have consulted agree with the broad principles set out by the NCSE in their advice to the Department of Education and Skills on resource teaching hours.

The NCSE recommendations set out to ensure children have their educational needs met based upon their needs and for all schools to be fully inclusive for children with disabilities. This is most welcome.

However, the NCSE advice is short on the fine detail that will determine the allocation of resource hours a child will be able to access. There are other aspects of the NCSE policy advice that must be implemented with great care to ensure it does not have the opposite effect that is intended.

Summary of main recommendations

The Department of Education and Skills should publish a fully costed plan for the implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004.

The needs descriptors that will underpin the allocation model must be developed in consultation with parents. The new allocation model must be pilot tested to ensure it is effective and does not result in certain children falling through the cracks.

The new model of allocation must be carefully monitored to ensure it does not have a detrimental impact on children with a

disability or schools that are supporting them. It is imperative that this new system does not lead to certain schools attracting a large amount of resources and thus become a magnet for pupils with support needs and where other schools direct the parents of such children.

The current system is operating on the basis of a 15% cut to a child's resource hour's allocation. This cut must be reversed without delay.

The Inclusion Support Service must not be established by using teachers currently employed as resource teachers.

The Inclusion Support Service must have speech and language therapists among its staff. Communication is a key element of an inclusive education.

The NCSE must be given the authority to compel a school to enroll a child with a special education need who applies for a place. The appropriate resources must be then made available to support the child.

The independent appeal system must be broader than what is currently proposed. It is also very difficult for a parent to complain directly to a principal about the actions of the principal.

