



INCLUSION IRELAND

National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability

Opening statement to the Oireachtas Special Committee on a Covid – 19 Response

Supporting Children to Learn

June 25th 2020

**This document is written in font 12 Verdana in line with Inclusion
Ireland plain English guidelines**

Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the chairperson, members and clerk of the committee for the invite to address you here today.

Established in 1961, Inclusion Ireland is a national, rights-based advocacy organisation that works to promote the rights of people with an intellectual disability.

The experience of families

On March 12th, teachers, pupils and parents were thrown into a very unusual situation as schools closed with almost immediate effect.

Inclusion Ireland conducted a survey of parents from April 30th to May 20th on how school closures were impacting on their lives. In total, 1064 people responded to the survey.

Just over 89% of respondents reported their child is missing school either, a lot (55.3%) or a bit (33.1%)

Educating at home is not working well for most respondents to Inclusion Ireland's survey. There are huge barriers to educating at home for parents, who are not teachers in most cases. Some parents state that their child presents with behaviours that can be a challenge or have poor attention skills that require the support of a skilled teacher and not a parent. The support from schools has been variable, from excellent to almost non-existent.

Parents told us:

"We are both working out of home. It is impossible to home school."

"Child has difficult behaviour, poor focus. Needs a teacher."

“I am on the front line and minding granny with dementia. Nothing has been done for the children of frontline workers”.

Pupils in special classes and schools¹

Primary pupils in special classes	6229
Pupils in special schools	8224
Total	14453

Technology – virtual education

Most families have access to some form of technology such as a laptop, smartphone or iPad to access schoolwork but 11% (or 116 respondents) have no access to any technology at all for schoolwork. While the virtual classroom is an option for some there is a technology deficit meaning many children cannot and have not been accessing education in this way.

Also, 45% of respondents do not have access to high speed broadband meaning no access to the internet or access only through costly 4G.

A full technology audit and supply of equipment must be undertaken with immediate effect to ensure children who would benefit from virtual education can do so. Any technology used must be fully accessible.

Parents told us:

“I am a teacher. My child is trying to use our device to learn and I am trying to use it to teach my pupils”.

“Lack of tech equipment”.

“We have 2 laptops between 5 and the internet keeps breaking down”.

¹ Key statistics 2018/2019, Department of Education and Skills, available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2018-2019.pdf>

What needs to happen

The research tells us that school closures for extended periods cause regression in learning and skills for children with intellectual disabilities. Individual cases of children regressing have recently been highlighted in the media, including children attending Rosdale special school in Galway.²

These children need to be top of the priority list of children returning to school. These children generally fall into the category of those with the highest support needs, traditionally referred to as 'moderate, severe and profound intellectual disability' and 'severe autism'. This is not a very large cohort of children and many are already educated in small class groups of 6 in school not supersized classes of 30+.

For most children with disabilities, direct access to teachers, SNAs and a structured lesson plan derived from their IEP is what is required. These children find it more difficult to engage in virtual classes so should be back in school as early as possible.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has initiated a 'summer program' which is expanded to include additional children in 2020. However, the scheme continues to exclude cohorts of children with disabilities and has been characterised by poor planning leaving schools and families frustrated and in the dark. One trade union has stated the lack of guidance makes the scheme unsafe for staff and pupils.³ Parents are also reporting a lack of transport as a major barrier to attending the summer program and there are significant fears for September. The National Council for Special Education has previously expressed concern about the scheme being open to challenge on equal status grounds; that has not changed. The scheme must be opened to all children with

² <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0602/1144846-school-learning-disabilities/>

³ www.forsa.ie

intellectual disabilities, including those in second level as they also experience regression.

A very small group of pupils in the Irish education system will not be able to attend schools some time. These are medically fragile pupils with disabilities to whom the DES needs to pay particular attention.⁴ These children need regular access to their teacher via remote means or through the home tuition scheme. It may require the DES to supply technology into homes as these children may not be back at school again for a significant period.

It must be noted that HSE therapy support which enable education have also ceased. Parents told us these are vital supports for their children and will assist them in their return to school.

Conclusion

To conclude Inclusion Ireland believes the following should happen to mitigate the undoubted and continuing regression in learning and skills for children with intellectual disabilities and autism.

1. A technology audit to ensure all children who would benefit from virtual classroom support can do so. Any technology must be fully accessible.
2. Include all children with intellectual disabilities in the 'summer program'. At present, secondary school children remain the subject of possible discrimination by their continued exclusion from the scheme. Schools, teachers and SNAs must be supported to take part in the scheme.

⁴ <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0524/1140333-covid-education-family-support/>

3. Children with disabilities need to be top of the priority listing for returning to school and any transport issue must be addressed in advance of becoming an issue. As noted, many are in small classes to begin.
4. The resumption of HSE therapies such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy must occur without delay. Many of these services can be delivered in a virtual manner.
5. The Department of Education and Skills urgently needs to identify all children who are medically compromised and put in place supports for them to receive a home tuition package until it is safe for them to return to school. Some of these children will not be back in school until a vaccine is available or Covid-19 is fully suppressed.

I would like to thank the committee for your time this afternoon.



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