

INCLUSION IRELAND

National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability

**Submission 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

About Inclusion Ireland

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 vision of Inclusion Ireland is that of people with an intellectual disability living and participating in the community with equal rights.

Inclusion Ireland's work is underpinned by the values of dignity, inclusion, social justice, democracy and autonomy and we use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to guide our work.

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of the new Coronavirus, or COVID19, as a pandemic, due to its rapid spread around the globe.

Ireland, along with other countries around the world, is taking action and putting in place plans to curtail the COVID-19 virus. One such action, announced on March 12th was to close all schools in Ireland.

On May 1st, Government announced a 'roadmap' to opening Ireland up again, which indicates that schools will not reopen until September at the very earliest and even then, only with good social distancing in place.¹

The research tells us clearly that this lengthy closure of schools will impact on children with intellectual disabilities and autism more than any other group of children. However, the Department of Education and Skills has been silent on their support needs to date.

Inclusion Ireland conducted a survey of parents from April 30th to May 20th to inform this submission. In total, 1064 people responded to the survey. The responses set out what educational supports parents feel

¹ Government published roadmap to ease Covid 19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society, accessed at www.merrionstreet.ie

their child needs at present, what they do not have and what is required to ease children back into school after such a long absence.

The experience to date

On March 12th, teachers, pupils and parents were thrown into a very unusual situation as schools closed with almost immediate effect. Parents were advised to home educate and that support would be forthcoming. Teachers were told to send work home with children and to immediately prepare for a situation they had never faced before.

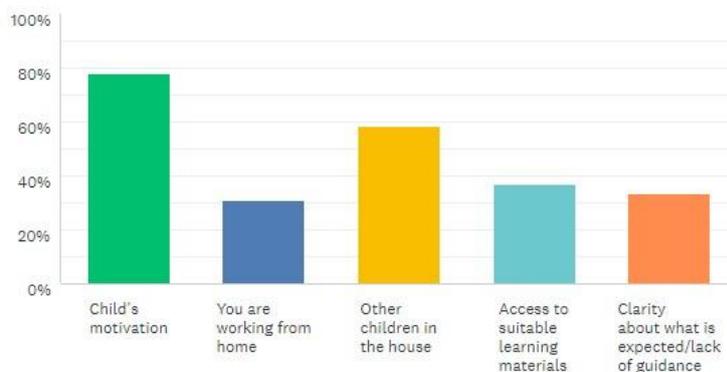
Educating at home is not working well for most respondents to Inclusion Ireland's survey. There are huge barriers to educating at home for parents, who are not teachers in most cases. Some parents state that their child presents with behaviours that can be a challenge or have poor attention skills that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

Q3

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What barriers do you face in providing home education? Tick as many options as you like.

Answered: 1,048 Skipped: 16



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Child's motivation	78.05% 818
▼ You are working from home	30.82% 323
▼ Other children in the house	58.30% 611
▼ Access to suitable learning materials	36.93% 387
▼ Clarity about what is expected/lack of guidance	33.49% 351

Total Respondents: 1,048

[Comments \(169\)](#)

Just over 30% of parents are trying to work from home which does not fit

in well with the simultaneous demands of home educating. As well as the child with an intellectual disability and/or autism, 58% of families have at least one other child in the home to care for. This further complicates trying to home educate.

While not a direct question, many parents stated they are working on the frontline in COVID medical settings and in supermarkets. They are not at home to educate their children and are getting no support from the state on education.

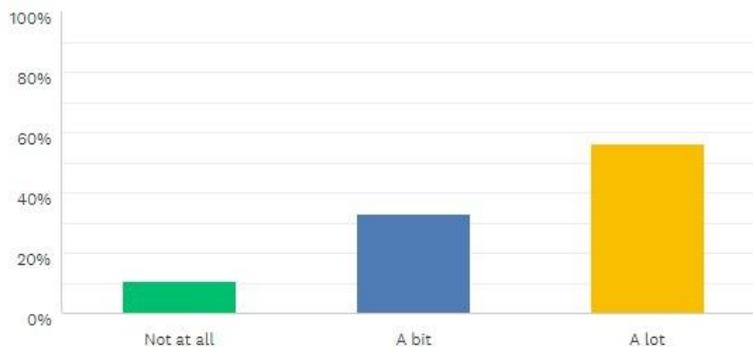
Education support to children from the school/teacher is variable with 37% of parents reporting a lack of access to suitable educational materials and 33% reporting a lack of clarity of what is expected/lack of guidance as a barrier to home education. The experience for children varies widely with some having daily class lessons via 'virtual means' to other children who have had no contact from their teacher.

Almost 4 in 5 (78%) parents report that their child is not motivated to learn at home. Children are associating school with education and not home.

Just over 89% of respondents reported their child is missing school either, a lot (55.3%) or a bit (33.1%), with the remaining 10.57% not missing school at all.

Is your child missing school?

Answered: 1,060 Skipped: 4



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Not at all	10.57%	112
A bit	33.11%	351
A lot	56.32%	597
TOTAL		1,060

Survey respondents told us:

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

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

"Child has challenging behaviour as he misses routine. Child needs somewhere to go".

"I am a nurse in a COVID unit. 4 children. Husband working from home. I am self-isolating. Husband doing his best"

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

"He does not want me to teach him as I cannot teach the way his teacher does, and this frustrates us both".

"I have 5 kids, 2 with special needs, 3 need help with homework. I spend from 9am to 11pm doing homework. My own mental health will suffer. We have 2 laptops between 5 and the internet keeps breaking down".

For a significant amount of families, home education is not working for a variety of reasons. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) must carefully examine how it is supporting families at this time. The example of Rosedale school in Galway has been highlighted in the media where children with significant disabilities are regressing without school as their parents are not skilled teachers.²

Case study of a child with complex needs

"My son requires and receives one-to-one support in school, sometimes more.

My son has had zero support since March 12th when his home became his school. He came home with a single page, a drawing. Clearly, a school caught unawares.

He attends a special school for children with autism and complex needs, code for mainstream cannot cope, special classes cannot cope.

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

He is autistic (level 3 or 'severe' in more common terms), has a moderate intellectual disability, is not verbal, and is arguably most in need of an education. Like all children, his education will pave his fate.

His education demands a focus on his independence as well as academic and behavioural (well-being) needs. He has had a battery of services to facilitate him in life, at least weekly, for close on a decade (mainly funded by us). All now gone.

He requires structure, routine and predictability. He requires face-to-face instruction.

The support from his school is nil. Staff outnumber pupils.

Sum total of two emails from the teacher. No thought, instruction or advice. He has an Individual Education Plan, but nothing forthcoming about this or how to deliver on any of the goals.

We (mainly his dad) are now teacher, SNA, speech therapist, occupational therapist, behaviour psychologist, psychiatrist, advocate and parent (and employee) rolled into one clumsy muddle.

He has a right to an education. At present this is gone."

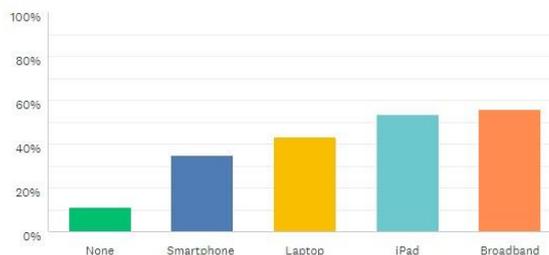
A digital divide?

Q4

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Has your child access to technology for school work? Tick as many options as you like

Answered: 1,054 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
None	11.01% 116
Smartphone	35.01% 369
Laptop	43.07% 454
iPad	53.42% 563
Broadband	55.60% 586
Total Respondents: 1,054	

At present the only method for teachers to contact their students is via technology.

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 schoolwork³. These children need to be supported immediately by the DES with a technology solution or direct access to teaching as they have no access to education at present.

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 small amount of comments indicates that in some families' technology must be shared between children and parents working creating challenges and difficulties in home education.

Survey respondents 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".

"No stable internet connection".

"We need an iPad sent home with textbooks and activities loaded up. It can be used for school after"

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

Supports required now

Parents and pupils need access to a range of supports with immediate effect. Respondents to Inclusion Ireland's survey said that until school reopens, they would benefit from virtual lessons delivered through Zoom or Skype (44.4%), a lesson plan developed from the child's individual education plan (IEP) and virtual access to a special needs assistant (SNA). Some schools are already hosting virtual classes, which works very well for some children. However, the experience is variable.

³ This number is likely an underestimate as the survey was conducted online.

Survey respondents told us:

“Currently have zoom classes 9-11 each school day. It’s invaluable.”

“Missed a call from the school on day 1 and haven’t been able to contact them since”.

“We are getting very good supports”.

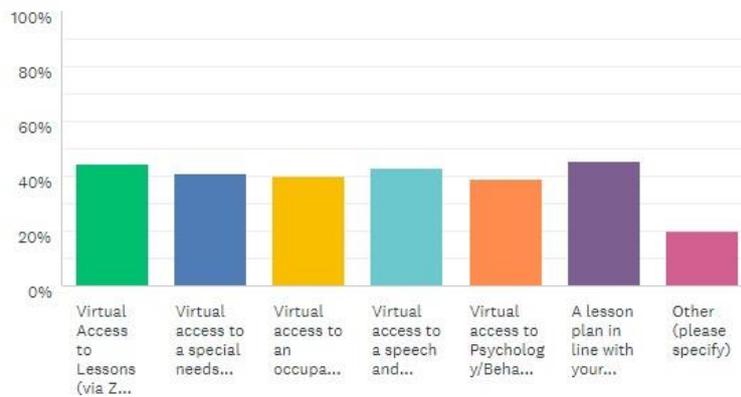
In recent years, the DES and the National Council for Special Education have begun to deploy allied health therapists such as behavioural psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists in schools in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE). Since COVID 19 restrictions have been put in place, virtually all therapy appointments in the HSE have ceased.

Q2

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Is there any educational support you feel would help until schools re-open?
Tick as many options as you like.

Answered: 1,009 Skipped: 55



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Virtual Access to Lessons (via Zoom or Skype etc.)	44.40% 448
Virtual access to a special needs assistant	41.23% 416
Virtual access to an occupational therapist	39.84% 402
Virtual access to a speech and language therapist	43.11% 435
Virtual access to Psychology/Behaviour therapy	38.75% 391
A lesson plan in line with your child's IE	45.59% 460
Other (please specify)	Responses 19.82% 200
Total Respondents: 1,009	

Respondents to the survey state that access to speech therapy (43%), occupational therapy (40%) and behavioural psychologist (39%) would support them through their home education journey.

In the free response to this section parents stated that they require technology, textbooks and workbooks to assist them in home education. A small number of parents asked that a small grant be made available to purchase materials for arts and crafts.

For a cohort of children with disabilities, direct access to teachers, SNAs and a structured lesson plan derived from the IEP is what is required. 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. The DES must also look at the home tuition/July Provision model or in school provision to see if it can be safely rolled out for an extended duration to these children.

Pupils in special classes and schools⁴

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

A very small group of pupils (emerging in free responses to this survey) in the Irish education system will not be able to attend face to face education for some time. These are medically fragile pupils to whom the DES needs to pay particular attention. These children need regular access to their teacher via remote or 1:1 in home means which may require the DES to supply technology into homes as these children may not be back at school again for a significant period. For example, RTE has reported on this issue where a child cannot risk attending school until a vaccine is available.⁵

Respondents told us these supports would help now:

"My daughter has complex needs, I need a teacher or SNA to the house as I have 3 other children".

"One to one home tuition. My child could not work through Zoom".

⁴ 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>

⁵ <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0524/1140333-covid-education-family-support/>

A help would be "video calls with his peers from school".
 "Reopen schools".
 "Home support".
 "Work in hard copy, lessons online especially for my kid".
 "Send hard copy materials as we have no printer at home".
 "Broadband that works and funding for educational supplies at home".
 "An IEP please".

Supports required to get back to school

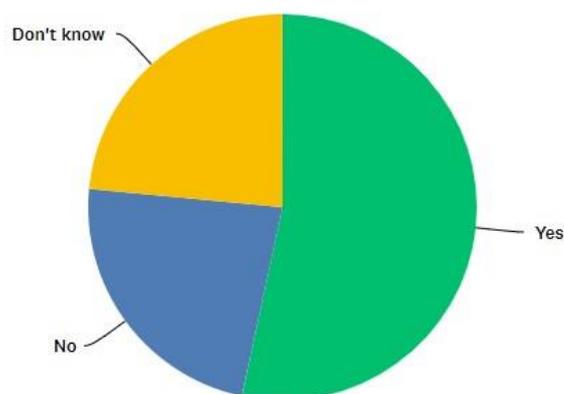
For many children with disabilities getting back to school will be a difficult transition, as the transition to home was also difficult.

Q5

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Do you think it will be difficult for your child to return to school?

Answered: 1,057 Skipped: 7



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Yes	53.36%	564
▼ No	23.18%	245
▼ Don't know	23.46%	248
TOTAL		1,057

We asked parents to rank the support that would help to ease their child back into school, now that we are facing schools remaining closed until September.

July provision or some form of home tuition and direct contact with the teacher are the highest ranked supports parents believe their child requires. The DES must examine the possibility of providing ongoing home tuition to children with complex needs without delay. Obviously, this needs to have a public health dimension but early, limited studies show there is a less risk of children passing COVID-19 to each other than adults.⁶

When schools are to reopen this will be a very difficult transition for many children, especially those for whom routine is very important. Transitions must be well planned to ensure these children return to full time education at the same time as their peers. Respondents have told us how this could be planned to support the child by having contact from the teacher, by communicating a planned return date at least one week in advance and having a number of arranged visits to the school in advance of the reopening date.

The supports required to ease a return to school ranked:

1. Contact with the teacher (4.03/6 score)
2. July provision/home tuition (3.8 score but highest 1st pref. 34%)
3. Advance notice of a return date (3.68 score)
4. Advance visits to the school in advance of reopening (3.67 score)
5. Support from a SNA (3.24 score)
6. Social story for returning to school (2.85 score)

When children are to return to school the DES must ensure that children with disabilities are not left behind. Almost 90% of parents surveyed believe that children with disabilities should return to school at the same time as other children or before. Inclusion Ireland has received calls from parents whose child with a disability is being refused access to childcare due to difficulties with social distancing. This must not occur in schools.

Respondents told us:

“.... Government has to take responsibility if children return to school blame should not rest with schools or service providers otherwise schools will not open for fear of reprisal”

⁶ Evidence summary of the spread of COVID 19 by children, HIQA, April 2020.

“Return when it is safe to do so”

July Provision – ‘summer program’

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has initiated a ‘summer program’ which is expanded to include additional children in 2020. While the expansion is welcome, 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.

The scheme continues to exclude most children with intellectual disabilities, including those with Down Syndrome at second level. This is despite them having the same risk of regressing in education as their primary school peers.

The DES has policy advice for 5 years that the July Provision scheme is potentially discriminatory: *“As the research evidence does not support the provision of an extended school year on the basis of a diagnosis of ASD only, we are concerned that continued funding may be open to challenge on equality grounds. Research shows other students with significant intellectual disabilities ... can also experience regression in learning and a slower rate of recoupment.”*⁷ The NCSE continue: *“We are not able to recommend continuation of a scheme which is inequitable”*.⁸ The scheme remains inequitable despite the Minister for Education and Skills settling a case in the courts last year for access to the scheme.

Schools have had no guidance (as at June 22nd) on reopening in a safe manner from the DES. The summer education scheme is due to begin next week. Parents report that this lack of guidance has led to schools not taking up the scheme. One Trade Union as stated to members that it is not safe to engage in the scheme until proper guidelines on safety are made available by the DES.⁹ In addition, many schools that are taking part in the scheme are telling parents that transport will not be available, despite a DES commitment to get pupils to schools.

One parent contacted Inclusion Ireland to say “since JP has been announced there has been absolutely no information about the HSE strand. My sons’ school is not running it. I spoke to #my son’s disability social worker and she hasn’t received any information and neither has the head of disability services in Donegal. These grand announcements sound great to everyone but it’s only those affected realise the truth. There are

⁷ Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools – NCSE Policy Advice 2015

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <https://www.forsa.ie/absence-of-guidance-deterring-schools-from-july-programmes/>

no pathways to access, no discussion between key players and as usual it's the children who suffer as they can't access supports".

Parents are also reporting that transport is a major issue and will be a barrier to some children attending the summer program and there are significant fears for September.

The United Nations view

While reliable figures on students with disabilities are not yet available it is likely that the current crisis has exacerbated their exclusion from education. As detailed in the policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children, students with disabilities are least likely to benefit from distance learning solutions. Lack of support, access to the internet, accessible software and learning materials is likely to deepen the gap for students with disabilities.¹⁰

Recommendations

1. If children only return part time in September, schools must contact parents of children with disabilities to conduct a technology audit. The DES must then respond by providing technology and materials that is accessible to engage in virtual online classes immediately.
2. Any distance learning provision must be accessible.
3. The DES must resource schools to send out books, workbooks, iPads with educational materials preloaded and arts materials to children with disabilities. An alternative is to make a grant available to parents to purchase such materials as required.
4. The DES must make therapy resources available through existing resources used for the pilot inclusion model, NCSE resources and in partnership with the HSE. This must be done swiftly using virtual or remote technology to support children with disabilities.
5. The DES needs to expand access to July provision. At present the scheme continues to discriminate against many children with intellectual disabilities. This is an urgent for children with complex learning or behaviour needs who are unable to interact with education in a remote manner.

¹⁰ Policy brief, A disability-inclusive response to COVID-19, United Nations, May 2020.

6. The DES needs to assess and plan for children with complex medical needs. It is unlikely these children will be in school in 2020 so longer-term planning for accessible home tuition is required.
7. When schools begin to reopen, children with disabilities must not be discriminated against, and must return to school at the same time as their classmates. In certain cases, an early staged return may be needed in advance to allow the child to re-engage in education.

Conclusion

Children with intellectual disabilities and autism are missing school a lot. For children with complex behaviour and medical needs home education is very difficult, despite the best efforts of parents and teachers. The experience of parents across the country varies widely with some children having daily class via Zoom and access to educational materials and smart applications from their teacher but some other children are having little or no contact or education provision. For many children their education stopped on March 12th.

Parents are struggling to provide any form of education to disabled children while also trying to work from home, work on the front line and isolate at home, or minding other children or elderly adults.

There is a small group of children who have no access to any form of technology to engage in virtual/online schoolwork. There is also a group of children with complex needs who cannot access education unless it is provided in person. For these children education has stopped.

Without access to school and therapy supports some children and their families are struggling to cope with the impact of the change the closing of schools has had on their lives and routines. They are finding it hard to adapt.

The DES has initiated a 'summer education' program that continues to exclude children with intellectual disabilities and thus remain inequitable and open to challenge on Equal Status grounds.



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