



Inclusion Ireland

The National Association for People
with an Intellectual Disability.

Inclusion Ireland's submission to the Department of Education and Youth's National Conversation on Education

February 2026

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Introduction

Ireland's commitment to inclusive education will not be delivered through short-term fixes or piecemeal provision. Families' experiences point to a persistent gap between rights and reality: supports are often delayed, uneven, and too dependent on individual persistence, local capacity, or eligibility rules rather than need. Inclusion Ireland's core recommendation is a statutory, costed, nationwide Inclusive Education Plan to give effect to [Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(December 2006\)](#) (UNCRPD), with clear entitlements, time-bound delivery, accountability, and transparent reporting on belonging and participation outcomes.

This submission is informed by a nationwide, online survey on school inclusion, discrimination and exclusion affecting children with intellectual disabilities and other neurotypes (393 responses). We reviewed the quantitative findings (n=391–392) and undertook focused thematic coding of open-text responses on school responses to concerns and the changes needed for children to experience belonging.

What is Working Well and What Good Practice Looks Like

Some families described schools getting it right: calm, practical communication, flexibility, and problem-solving without blame. These examples matter because they show that inclusive practice is achievable and can be more widespread.

“The difference is communication . . . they don't blame parents but help . . . they might reduce his workload when things get hard and then reintroduce things when he is able.”

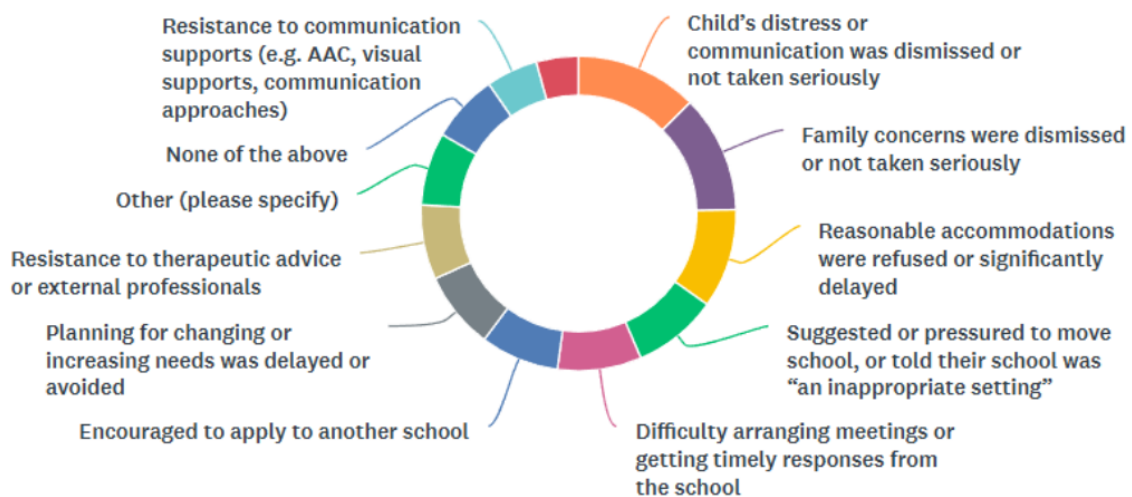
What Makes it Harder to Participate and Thrive in Education Today

Many families describe a system where inclusion depends on persistence and luck, rather than clear rights delivered consistently.

“Took several months of . . . fighting and many, many meetings before supports were put in place – took most of the school year.”

Our quantitative results back this up. 39.4% of survey respondents said their child’s distress or communication was dismissed, 37.9% said family concerns were dismissed, and 32.0% reported reasonable accommodations refused or significantly delayed. 22.0% selected “none of the above”, underlining uneven experiences.

Has your child experienced any discrimination in school? (select all that apply)



This pattern is consistent with [Inclusion Ireland’s wider evidence under Article 24 \(June 2025\)](#): inconsistent in-school supports, mainstream schools often unequipped to support children with intellectual disabilities, and families steered toward special schools without adequate information or support.

Another barrier is gatekeeping across the wider system, even where individual schools are trying.

“The school go above and beyond . . . My difficulty is that it is NCSE policy . . . [my child] has been refused assistive technology because he does not meet their criteria . . .”

Where essential supports depend on criteria rather than need, children’s access to the curriculum, communication and participation can hinge on processes that do not reflect the child’s day-to-day reality.

Changes We Are Seeing and Why Expectations Are Rising

We are seeing rising expectation that disabled and neurodivergent children should be included in local, mainstream schools with the right supports, and that families should not have to “fight” for basic accommodations.

The scale is also significant. As of the 2025/2026 academic year, [departmental estimates are that around 240,000 pupils – about 25% of the overall mainstream school population – are receiving supports for additional needs \(January 2026\)](#). Inclusive education is therefore about core system reform, not a siloed or specialised issue.

For teachers and schools, expectations have risen, but delivery has not been matched with clear entitlements, resourcing, and training. Last year’s EPSEN Review recognises the importance of (and State’s duty towards) UNCRPD alignment and a phased approach, but [it does not propose a time-bound, fully costed 10-year plan, nor does it fill the gap in enforceable rights to supports \(June 2025\)](#).

A 2040 Vision: Belonging, Rights, and an Inclusive Education Plan

Families define inclusion as belonging: being safe, respected, understood, and able to participate.

“The school would have to believe they belong . . . a child feeling safe . . . enforcement of rights . . . not a one size fits all attitude.”

Only 38.4% of respondents said their child is “always” or “often” treated as a valued and respected member of the school community, while a cumulative 58.6% selected “sometimes”, “rarely” or “never”. This points to belonging as a lived outcome that is still not secure for many children.

Families also question a model where “special classes” become the default answer rather than one option within a genuinely needs-led, rights-based system:

“Make children with disabilities the ‘norm’ rather than the exception . . . special classes not to be used as further segregation . . . this is not inclusive.”

Inclusion Ireland’s proposal is a statutory, nationwide Inclusive Education Plan to give effect to Article 24 and to the reform agenda now on the table through the EPSEN Review. This builds on our earlier calls from [our 1,000 Voices survey \(July 2025\): for rights-based training delivered by Disabled Persons’ Organisations and an independent complaints mechanism for schools](#).

At minimum, the Plan should:

- **Lead with culture change and tackling attitudinal barriers:** whole-of-school anti-ableism, high professional expectations, inclusive leadership, and sustained CPD/reflective practice.
- **Include cross-departmental, whole-of-government commitments** with clear milestones, resourcing, and responsibilities for delivery in every school.
- **Join up supports in schools** by integrating education, health, and social care so supports follow the child (including communication and assistive technology).
- **Embed children’s voices in policy design and accountability** through accessible mechanisms and publishing disaggregated data on experience and outcomes.

Conclusion

Many submissions will describe the current moment. Our insights add a clear message about long-term impact: when the system is slow, defensive, or gatekept, families learn that inclusion is conditional. A statutory Inclusive Education Plan should be developed alongside [the Government’s pledge to reform the Disability Act 2005 \(January 2025\)](#), secure UNCRPD-aligned entitlements, cross-agency duties, and accountability mechanisms support children’s participation in education in practice. This way, Ireland can move from crisis responses to steady progress and ensure that, by 2040, belonging is the norm rather than the exception.

About Inclusion Ireland

Inclusion Ireland is the national organisation advocating for the rights and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. We work to influence policy and practice through rights-based advocacy, accessible information, and direct engagement with people with intellectual disabilities, their families, and key decision-makers. Our work is grounded in the values of equality, dignity, and self-determination, guided by the principles of the UNCRPD. We are committed to building a society where people with intellectual disabilities can live independently, participate equally in community life, and enjoy the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.

Our work is supported by:



Rialtas na hÉireann
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