



**Inclusion Ireland**

The National Association for People  
with an Intellectual Disability.

# The Pathway to Inclusive Education

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## Conference Report and Inclusive Education Alliance Formation 2023

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**[InclusionIreland.ie](https://inclusionireland.ie)**



WORKING  
TOWARDS A  
FULLY INCLUSIVE  
MODEL OF  
EDUCATION

Eimear McNally, Graphic Harvester drawing a visual representation of key topics and learnings from the seminar

ARE SPECIAL  
CLASSES  
ACTUALLY the  
OPTIMAL SETTING  
INCLUSION



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Panel Discussion

# Opening Statement

## CEO Inclusion Ireland

**Inclusion Ireland were pleased to host a seminar “The Pathway to Inclusive Education” on November 15th 2022 in Dublin. This in-person event brought together people with intellectual disabilities, disabled people, Disabled Persons Organisations, family members, people working within the education sector, policy makers and politicians. It is our view at Inclusion Ireland that when we are all in a room together, powerful things can happen.**



Inclusive education is a core pillar of our work at Inclusion Ireland. We believe that inclusive communities have their beginnings in education. Our vision is for a time when all children get to go to school together. This vision should not leave out any child; from those who require a small amount of support to access their rights to children who require intensive support and who have traditionally been left out of the “mainstream” conversation. This vision includes children who are non-speaking, have medical needs and/or psychosocial disabilities. It is unfair and unjust that because a child has a disability they may miss out on the experience of going to their local school with their peers and their siblings. It is also unjust that non-disabled children miss out on the benefits of truly inclusive classrooms.

We recognise that inclusive education can be an emotive and complex subject. We want to ensure that we are connected to what is happening in the here and now for children in schools across the country, whilst also beginning to shape the conversation of a vision for a rights-based model of education in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In light of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act this year, this conversation is timely and important.

We know that there are a lot of myths about inclusive education. Inclusive education is not about fitting a child into the system as it currently stands, rather it is about imagining a different system, one where all children get the same opportunities. For too long children with intellectual disabilities have been forced to fit into narrow boxes – special classes, special schools or mainstream. We want to challenge that kind of thinking. It is not the child who should bend to suit the system and fit into available choices, rather the system should bend and flex to suit the child.

When we visualise inclusive education, we sometimes picture all children sitting at desks in a mainstream class, all day. This is not real inclusion! Real inclusion is about designing the school so that all children have an opportunity to attend, giving the school the resources, training and support they need and then meeting that child exactly where they are at and supporting them in the way that they need to be supported. Real inclusion is not a neat “end destination”, it is a set of values, it is a set of beliefs; you belong here, we will support and accept you as you are, we will not give up on you. Real inclusion is a process, it is a pathway, it is different for every child. It involves the family, it sees the school as a central point in developing inclusive communities, in supporting children to value difference.

The reality is we are some way from this inclusive education vision. That doesn't mean we should stop trying, the opposite in fact! We must seize this moment and paint a picture of what could be possible if leaders and policy makers prioritise inclusive education and the value in it for all children. The single biggest theme we found in all of our work was that of developing trust. Families need to trust their child will get the support they need in their local school. Schools need to trust that they will get the support they need in supporting all children in their community. The only way to build this trust is through developing a cross government plan for inclusive education over the next ten years where we can see the commitment of our leaders and evaluate our progress through improvements in the quality of the educational experience children receive.

In the meantime, there are urgent children's rights issues that must be addressed. Access to school places, seclusion and restraint, short school timetables, travelling long distances to schools, teacher and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) training, resources and access to assistive technology. In sorting those urgent issues, we must not lose sight of the big picture of all children belonging in their local school; our communities will be the better for it.



**Derval McDonagh**  
**CEO Inclusion Ireland**

# Conference Participants and Presenters

We would like to thank the following people for presenting and participating in our conference

<b>Brian Hayes</b>	<b>The National Platform of Self-advocates</b>
<b>Tamara Byrne</b>	<b>Self-advocate and Inclusion Ireland Spokesperson</b>
<b>Margaret Turley</b>	<b>Self-advocate and Inclusion Ireland Spokesperson</b>
<b>Emma Costello</b>	<b>Self-advocate and Inclusion Ireland Spokesperson</b>
<b>Minister Josepha Madigan</b>	<b>Minister of State for Inclusive and Special Education</b>
<b>Sinéad Gibney</b>	<b>Chief Commissioner, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission</b>
<b>Angela Locke-Reilly</b>	<b>Inclusion Ireland and Parent</b>
<b>Miriam Kenny</b>	<b>Parent, Teacher and Chair of Involve Autism</b>
<b>Carol McSherry</b>	<b>Special Needs Assistant</b>
<b>Dr. Joanne Banks</b>	<b>Assistant Professor in Education, Trinity College Dublin</b>
<b>Adam Harris</b>	<b>CEO, AslAm</b>
<b>Dr. Niall Muldoon</b>	<b>The Ombudsman for Children</b>



I don't want other people with disabilities to experience the anxiety and depression that I went through. They should have the same opportunities as everybody else.

**Tamara Byrne, Self-Advocate**



Miriam Kenny - Parent, Teacher and Chair of Involve Autism presenting at the seminar

# Seminar Outline

The seminar can broadly be divided into three sections:

1

**The pre-consultation:** In recognition of the challenges in teachers and SNAs participating in person on the day, we ran an online consultation around inclusive education. We met with teachers, educators and SNAs and gathered their feedback around inclusive education, the challenges, the barriers and the solutions.

2

**Presenters and panel discussions:** The voice of the person with a lived experience of the education system was front and centre. We invited a number of experts, policy makers and people working in advocacy and education to present or be part of a panel discussion.

3

**Round table discussions:** The attendees joined round table discussions where several questions were posed. The discussions were facilitated and documented by the Inclusion Ireland team.

## Sinéad Gibney - Chief Commissioner, IHREC

Educational reform doesn't easily fit within electoral cycles but if we look at this not as a line in any individual programme for government, but rather as a human rights imperative for successive governments, it has a chance to change our country and to empower our children for the better.

Without the correct legislative backing we've seen children without appropriate school places, without the support required within the classroom, or too often restrained, excluded or expelled from their schools.

Our inclusive schools seek positive experiences for their pupils, a sense of belonging and outcomes for all pupils with access, participation, personal development and achieving education credentials among the key features of their school adventures.

Education empowers us, it inspires us, it socialises us and it gives us a grounding in trying to make some sense of the often perplexing world around us.

In building inclusive education, the very first block in the foundation must be seeing education as each individual's human right, and for universal education to be appropriate to the needs of us all.





Tamara Byrne opening the seminar

# Findings from pre consultation and round table discussions

## Question 1

### What are the barriers for children right now in accessing their right to education?

#### Significant change is needed

- Many participants spoke about the need for radical or significant change. Right now, a child is expected to “fit in” to a system as it exists. Real inclusion is about changing the system to suit the child. There are limited options available; mainstream, special class, special school and home tuition. If a child does not neatly fit into one of these, the system is not set up to allow for creative and innovative child led approaches. For change to happen we must get more comfortable with uncertainty and move away from “system think” and fixing the system as it is. We need to move towards a more rights based and child led approach which is not as “neat” but is about accepting a child for who they are.
- Participants spoke about the narrow definition of education and how damaging this can be - the points race, focus on academics rather than life skills and taking a broader view of education.
- Participants spoke about the need to move towards a more collaborative model with parents and community as partners.

#### Culture and attitudinal barriers

There are many complex barriers arising from our attitude as a society when it comes to how we view disabled children and their right to education.

- Differences in what we accept: What we accept for a child with a disability, we would never conceive of accepting for a non-disabled child (e.g. long distance to school, having to apply to 30 schools etc.) Thinking has moved on from the medical/deficit model towards the social model of disability where we value and accept difference. Our society needs to move on too. It should be the norm that a school supports all children from the local community regardless of support need.
- The lack of representation of neurodivergent teachers and SNAs was highlighted in terms of being able to successfully challenge attitudes. There is also a lack of teachers, principals and SNAs from minority backgrounds including the Traveller community.
- A lack of buy in around inclusive education from families - lack of trust in the system. How will my child who has significant needs get the support they need in the local school?

- Provision of “special education” in schools can be very separate from the whole school community unless there is strong school leadership.
- A need to move beyond medical/deficit approaches and towards strength-based approaches with children.
- There needs to be a unified approach around the direction of travel for education for children, rather than an approach which has “evolved” without careful planning in a rights based way.

## Structural and systemic barriers

The model of education for children with disabilities has “evolved” organically rather than in a planned way. This has enabled segregated approaches without an evidence base behind it.

- There is no clearly articulated pathway towards a fully inclusive model of education. The National Council for Special Education policy position has yet to be published. This leaves inclusive education in limbo and sometimes regressive steps being taken or proposed.
- The “special education” budget is seen as separate from the mainstream education budget. This can create barriers. The right to education is not “special”. Supporting disabled children should be a part of the general discourse around education.
- Families who can afford to get help are more likely to achieve positive outcomes for their child. e.g. finances to access private therapies and having the resources and the knowledge to challenge the system.
- Children who experience multiple barriers face added challenges e.g. disabled children from minority backgrounds
- Lack of joined up thinking across health and education. The provision of therapies and other supports to children lacks clarity and there appears to be a low level of engagement across health, social care and education with the child at the centre.
- Our legislation is not fit for purpose - i.e. the Disability Act 2005 and the EPSN Act 2004. Whilst the EPSN Act is now under review, the Disability Act should also be reviewed in tandem.
- Lack of consistent planning from the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education has led to a lack of availability of school places for children, children needing to travel long distances to access a school places and children on home tuition who should be in school.

## Access, admission and staying in school

- Getting an appropriate school place for a child is incredibly challenging. Parents are applying to multiple schools if a child has any level of “complex needs”, options are limited or non-existent. Often families will accept any school place out of exhaustion and frustration, but all school places should be meaningful, child centred, appropriate, local and supported.
- Families have little to no support in navigating this system, especially parents who may have literacy challenges themselves.
- The issue of reduced timetables and expulsions were mentioned. These frequently occur due to a lack of understanding of the child’s needs, a lack of education and training for the school teams, a lack of collaborative approaches with families and a lack of resources and support for the school. There is limited data available around these issues. Some families are “encouraged” to change schools if the child experiences issues. It is difficult to capture this data meaningfully. There is a lack of emphasis on hearing from the child and understanding their needs and preferences.

## Resources

- Large classroom sizes were frequently mentioned.
- The ratio of teachers and SNAs to children is not appropriate to facilitate meaningful inclusion in some instances.
- Lack of access to specialist support; therapists, psychologists etc. was cited as a barrier.
- Physical resources such as access to outdoor play and space within the schools environment to meet children’s individual needs. Some children need lots of space to move, play and regulate. The traditional school environment does not allow for this.
- Assistive technology (AT): Very difficult to access. Pathways are not clear enough and teachers need to be given authority to access Assistive Technology without having to wait for an Occupational Therapist or a Speech and Language Therapist to write an application.
- Bureaucracy and red tape: Teachers and school staff spending hours applying for additional supports for students.

## Teacher and SNA training

- There is inadequate training available to teachers and SNAs; gaps in both formal and informal learning opportunities were identified. Often teachers and SNAs start working with children without any formal or informal learning opportunities.
- There is not enough time for reflective practice, supervision and support in school environments.
- There is little support for teachers or SNAs who wish to get further qualifications.
- Some training offered to schools is not rights and relationship based and takes an overly behaviourist approach.

## Distance

Given the challenges in accessing a school place, many children are travelling long distances from their local community and from their siblings.

- Parents having to subsidise costs or drive children long distances.
- Distance to school can impact the family relationship and connection with the school community.
- Families may rarely meet a teacher or other parents if their child is travelling a long distance.



**We are at a crucial point in Ireland's inclusive education reform journey. We have the opportunity to move from a policy focus on 'special educational needs' and separate 'special' provision to one where every child and young person, regardless of their ability, can attend their local mainstream school. Although it can often seem like opinions are divided when it comes to how we provide for children with disabilities, this Inclusive Education seminar highlights to me a level of consensus among the various stakeholders around what an inclusive system of education looks like, and what it will take for us to achieve it".**

***Dr Joanne Banks, Assistant Professor in Education,  
Trinity College Dublin***

## Question 2

### What are the enablers of inclusive education in schools?

#### Relationship

- Real inclusion starts with building a relationship with a child. It's about accepting a child for who they are and building an empathetic relationship. "Connecting with the child and not with the report".
- Inclusion is about the belief that all children belong in the school; no matter what support they might need. It's about supporting the child to feel that sense of belonging.
- Positive relationship building is also about seeing the child's strengths and working from there. Every child has strengths and gifts, the most inclusive schools make it their mission to be curious, to find these strengths and work with them.

#### Leadership

Leadership within schools is particularly important.

The tone is often set by the school principal and he/she supports the creation of a welcoming environment for all pupils and fosters an attitude around "not giving up" on a child.

#### Risk and change

- Inclusion is about becoming comfortable with taking well thought out risks and being creative.
- There is no one model or way of "doing it" - it's about working with the child as an individual and figuring it out. This involves a change in mindset. Isolated examples of success are not always helpful or transferable yet are often used as examples of evidence of absolute success. Inclusion is more fluid than that.
- Having a creative, open, flexible mindset is critical.

## Environment

- Principals of universal design for learning support a child's inclusion.
- Where there is space for children to "come and go" at their pace and in their time, inclusion is possible. Reimagining the school environment is so important.
- Let a child choose when and if they want to be included and when or if they want to be alone or with few people. Forced inclusion is not true inclusion.
- There needs to be time for movement breaks and developing an understanding that education can happen anywhere in the school environment, at any time.

## Culture

- Schools that are about valuing more than just points and academia are more likely to be inclusive. Schools recognising that all children are on different education journeys, all are valuable and worthwhile.
- Schools that see inclusive education as a positive thing and are determined to support all children in the community.
- Educators who see themselves as "access" focused rather than "academic" focused and "inclusive educators".
- Schools where teachers and SNAs are valued and appreciated.



## Collaborative mindsets

- Schools that see parents, families and the community as partners are often more inclusive. Letting go of “expert model” and embracing the “we don’t know, let’s find out” approach in partnership with people who know the child best.
- Schools that see children as experts in their own lives and put the child’s voice at the centre are more likely to be inclusive environments.
- Schools that learn from other schools and collaborate across communities. If inclusion can happen in pre-schools, it can happen elsewhere.
- Schools that see and value intersectional approaches; many communities experience marginalisation and similar barriers.

## Resources

- Smaller classroom sizes help to facilitate inclusion.
- Ratios of teacher and SNAs to students.
- SNAs play a vital role in inclusive communities. They are often the child’s advocate and main support.
- Consistent access to Children’s Disability Network Teams (CDNT).
- Access to budget for assistive technology and alternative and augmentative communication aids.

## Training and reflection

- Teachers and SNAs who have opportunities for professional development whether formal or informal are likely to feel more equipped to support children more effectively.
- Training which supports school teams to change mindsets and attitudes is particularly important. Seeing the child as a rights holder, moving away from deficit-based approaches and towards rights based, child led supports.



**Inclusive Education is where all children learn that people, regardless of academic ability, have equal value and have the capacity to uniquely contribute to their class, the community and wider society.**

**Parent**



Roundtable Discussions

## Question 3 and our recommendations

### What needs to change over the next 10 years so that all children can go to school together?

From the discussions, we grouped the feedback by theme and created key recommendations on the pathway towards a fully inclusive model of education.

#### Child's voice and participation

1. The child's voice needs to be front and centre in education. There is a need to develop children's advocacy in Ireland.
2. All education policies should be child centred and developed in collaboration with children and young people.

#### Planning rather than reacting

3. We need to see a fully costed, cross government, multi-annual supported plan around the pathway to inclusive education. This should be a priority of government.
4. We need better planning and data from the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education. All families should know about their disabled child's school place at the same time as any other child.

We need to create trust in the education system for families. Part of the reason families advocate for special schools is because they cannot trust that their local school will get the resources it needs to support their child. Trust in the system will come through families and schools seeing better planning and moving away from reactionary ways of working.

5. We need data on the numbers of children on reduced timetables, expelled or encouraged/requested to move schools.

## Child centred environments

Education needs to move away from “system focused” and towards “child led”. More creative options need to be available. Children shouldn’t have to “fit into” what is there, there needs to be other options based on the individual child’s needs.

6. School buildings need to be designed with flexibility and child centred learning in mind. Universal design for learning as a key principle; we need to talk more about removing barriers rather than just the “provision of support”.
7. Schools need to be designed and reimaged to enable children to move freely with an acknowledgment that learning can happen anywhere in school.

## Leadership

8. We need to see and experience leadership around inclusive education from the highest levels of Government and the Department of Education, down to individual schools and communities.
9. We need to see leaders courageously articulating the vision, notwithstanding all the challenges and real-world issues that need to be worked through.



A group of people chatting before the seminar begins

## Attitudes

10. Advocacy organisations need to clearly articulate what inclusive education is. We need to support wider society to understand what inclusive education means and the value of it for all children (not just children with disabilities)
11. Advocacy organisations and schools need to share stories of where children with higher support needs are included meaningfully in their local community. It is difficult for families and schools to see how a child with higher support needs could be supported in the school as it currently stands. We need to start by having these conversations; no child can be excluded based on their support needs. If we don't address this, people will continue to reject inclusion as a possibility.

## Resources

12. More SNAs, smaller classes, more teachers. We need to bring classroom sizes down below 20.
13. The CDNTs need to be properly resourced so they can work across a child's home, school and community. Joined up thinking between health, social care and education is absolutely critical.
14. We need to increase the state's investment in inclusive models. More resources into the current system won't fix everything. Real change will come when we use resources to enable inclusion in creative ways that are child led.

## Training and education of school staff

15. Build time for reflective practice and learning into school days.
16. Examine more formal learning opportunities i.e. what kind of training is available at undergraduate and postgraduate level for teachers and SNAs? Is it current and up to date and reflective of affirmative and child centred learning? Are teachers and SNAs supported to upskill?

## Policy and legislation reform

17. The EPSN Act needs to be reviewed in line with our obligations under the UNCRPD.
18. The Disability Act should be reviewed in tandem.
19. There needs to be policy around eliminating seclusion and restraint.
20. Policy should reflect the changing thinking towards rights based, neuroaffirmative approaches in supporting children.

“

**I am very concerned that if the Department of Education continues to generate solutions that contain some element of separation, then it will become increasingly difficult to unwind them in the future. It is crucial that from this point onwards all decisions made and actions taken should be about building a strong, inclusive education system, which is fully supportive of all of our children equally. At the moment there is a twin track approach of a) mainstream education and b) facilitation of special education needs, but what we need now is a clear plan as to when and how those tracks will converge into one inclusive pathway to education.**



**We also need to ensure that every school is appropriately resourced to provide education to the children in their local area. In addition, we need to expect that they will provide education to all local children. That is key to realising inclusivity. All children grow up together, go to school together, play together, and help each other, while learning about their various differences – that is the future I would like to see.**

***Dr Niall Muldoon***  
***Ombudsman for Children***

# The Inclusive Education Alliance: Next Steps

**As part of the seminar, Inclusion Ireland introduced work around the development of an “Inclusive Education Alliance”. The pathway towards a fully inclusive model of education will require a movement for change. We want to create opportunities for people to come together and collaborate on this journey.**

We believe we will be more effective if we can work together as disabled people, Disabled Persons Organisations, families, policy makers and advocates.

We also believe that there are short term issues which require immediate and focused attention, whilst staying true to the vision of all children going to school together.



Eimear McNally, Graphic Harvester

## What you can expect from the Inclusive Education Alliance:

1

We are working towards a fully inclusive model of education. This means we will work towards a future where all children go to school together, no matter what level of support they may happen to need.

2

We understand that there is a lack of trust in the current system and this is pushing families towards making choices to send their children to special schools and special classes. We are compassionate and understanding about this. We know it is the system that needs to change.

3

We know there is a lack of understanding about what inclusive education means. We will work to develop a better understanding that inclusive education is not about fitting a child into the current system, it is about reimagining the education system to be focused on the child.

4

We define inclusive education as:

*Children welcomed in their local school with the same equality of access as all other children. The school is equipped and designed to meet all children's needs in the community incorporating principals of universal design for learning. The child's individual needs are also met. The child can be educated anywhere in the school, in the mainstream class, in quieter environments, in outdoor spaces and a combination of all of these. The child's voice is front and centre. Parents and the community are collaborators and are valued. School staff are trained and have the expertise to support all children. The school believes that the child belongs there and will continue to believe that even if things are hard. Flexibility, creativity and rights-based supports are at the heart of how the school works in promoting the rights of the child to education.*

5

We will campaign for change in language and how we speak about children with disabilities, moving away from "special" and towards rights-based language. Language sets our tone and intention and indicates how we value children. We want the EPSN Act to be renamed the Inclusive Education Act. We want to stop describing children's "behaviours" and move towards describing what support a child needs to thrive and flourish.

6

#### **We will campaign for real world changes in the short term.**

- Statutory guidance on seclusion and restraint.
- Better data gathering on expulsions, reduced timetables and students who are encouraged to change schools.
- Reduced classroom numbers.
- We want the NCSE to publish its inclusive education policy.
- We want the education budget to increase and support inclusion; reduce class sizes, fund more SNA posts.
- We want better data gathering and planning from the NCSE on the provision of local school places for children.
- We will campaign for rights based, neuroaffirmative approaches in supporting children.

7

#### **We will campaign around issues for longer term systemic change**

- We want a fully costed 10-year cross government plan for inclusive education.
- We want the EPSN act to be UNCRPD compliant.
- We want the Disability Act to be reviewed and a right to services enshrined in legislation.
- We want societal attitudes to inclusive education to change.
- We want better training and education for teachers and SNAs which are focused on children's rights.
- We recognise that many communities face exclusion from education; Traveller children, children from migrant communities. We will work in solidarity with communities facing similar issues.

## Becoming a member of the alliance

### If you would like to become a member of the alliance

Please read “what you can expect” from the alliance, this will form the basis of how we will work together. Although terms of reference will be set within the first few weeks of the alliance meeting, it can be expected that the alliance will meet up to six times a year online. This may become more frequent if there is a particular campaign or issue to discuss.

### The alliance will:

- Be a central point for sharing information around inclusive education.
- Coordinate campaigns around specific topics.
- Share resources.
- Work towards change in a sustained way over time.

**Email Inclusion Ireland to sign up to be a member of  
the Inclusive Education Alliance**  
**[info@inclusionireland.ie](mailto:info@inclusionireland.ie)**  
**A registration form will then be sent to you to complete**

# Acknowledgements

**Thank you to everyone who attended 'The Pathway to Inclusive Education' and helped inform this report.**

**Thank you to**

- People with intellectual disabilities
- Disabled people
- Disabled Persons Organisations
- Family members
- People working within the education sector
- Policy Makers
- Politicians



Roundtable Discussions



Brian Hayes, Chair of the National Platform of Self-advocates, speaking as part of the Discussion Panel



## **Inclusion Ireland**

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