



## **Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the call for submissions by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on its Statement of Strategy 2022-2026.**

**(May 2021)**

### **Introduction**

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (19,000+) in out of school services employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities. Many of our members teach in special classes in mainstream schools. We also have a small number of members teaching in special schools.

Close examination of all relevant data indicates that schools in the ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the most significant proportion of students with special needs and coming from areas of educational and economic disadvantage. ETB schools are two to four times more likely to be designated DEIS as other school types (DES statistics, 2018).

In August 2020, the TUI carried out research into the distribution of SNAs in the post-primary system. Seeing as SNAs are only allocated to schools where there is a clear need for the same, it is a reasonable approximation of the distribution of students with SEN across the various school sectors. The research found that voluntary secondary schools represented 52% of all schools and 55% of all students but only required 42% of SNAs. ETB schools represented 34% of all schools and 29% of all students but had 37% of SNAs. Community and Comprehensive schools accounted for 14% of all schools and 17% of all students but 20% of all SNAs.

In February 2021, the TUI analysed DES data on which mainstream post-primary schools had special classes in September 2020. The data shows that 62% of all special classes in post-primary schools, at that time, were located in ETB or C&C schools even though those schools represented only 48% of all post-primary schools.

### **NCSE Strategy 2022-2026**

The current strategy documents set out the increasing remit of the organisation due to its rapidly increasing response to particular needs in our society. The current strategy recognises the need to ensure that the organisation is adequately resourced and staffed to achieve the outcomes it has set. This has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers in employment moderated by NCSE. The strategy as we advance must develop platforms that will allow for engagement with NCSE employees on a macro level. The new strategy must reference the changing roles that NCSE staff are required to fulfil. The organisation must have structures that allow these relationships to be managed. Representative bodies play an essential role in providing a regulated interaction and negotiation, leading to progressive outcomes.

The ongoing need for policy development and policy review can be supplemented by increasing the time, resources and fora to allow the valuable experience gained in the classroom to be gathered, collated and used to improve all policies. This could be recognised as an action point under the existing Goal number four.

The ongoing development of a single resource to support schools that enable them to address diverse needs is welcomed. The NCSE has a vital role in supporting students in post-primary education. The current strategy document speaks of parents' concerns for their son or daughter as they progress their education and training after post-primary school education has finished. NCSE has a role in supporting students with SEN as they transition to further and higher education. This has never been meaningfully enacted. The TUI believes that this role of supporting transition should be fully enacted. NCSE should seek to interact with DFHERIS as an active and valued stakeholder. All opportunities must be put in place for the

SEN student to progress to further education and the workplace. NCSE must assist in providing that pathway.

The single resource needs to expand its function to help the SEN student bridge the gap of progression from post-primary to further education, which is a step that may be difficult for them to achieve independently. Ongoing and uninterrupted support for SEN students to make this critical transition must be highlighted and resourced. The TUI is asking for supports to follow students to FE, PLCs and into the third level

Monitoring the effective use of SEN allocations in schools must avoid the trap of becoming overly bureaucratic and burdensome. However, time for testing, certain planning and administration is necessary. All of this requires time allocation, training and professional development. The effectiveness of the SEN teacher interaction with the student must not be assessed by demanding endless form-filling.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) develops the curriculum components for all students at the Primary and Post Primary level. The TUI is an active participant and stakeholder in the activities of the NCCA. The Senior Cycle review process is currently at an advanced stage. The final review report is presently being readied for submission to the Minister's Office. The TUI has highlighted the deficiencies to date in the lack of suitable programmes at the senior cycle level for those who have finished the L1 and L2 courses at the junior Cert level. The NCSE could seek stakeholder status at NCCA and contribute proactively to the discussions to develop suitable curricular contents. The availability of NCSE voice and research at this level would be very beneficial.

In many cases, teachers undertake additional qualification before taking up their roles as practitioners and organisers in SEN education. The removal of the SEN allowance payable in the past to these teachers has had a negative effect and discouraged the uptake of the

qualification. NCSE must promote the reinstatement of the SEN allowance so that teachers with these additional qualifications continue to be attracted into SEN education.

Data clearly shows that students with SEN are far more likely to attend ETB and C&C schools than voluntary secondary schools. The TUI believes that all students should be able to access mainstream schools unless the needs of the students are so serious that they could not cope in a mainstream school. The TUI believes that inclusive education is essential, but that inclusion must be supported by the resourcing of schools and the resourcing of support services. Staff who pursue additional qualifications must be reimbursed. The role of the teacher is to support the education of the child whilst the SNA (if applicable) can cater to the care needs of the child (Circular 30/14 and the May 2018 NCSE review of SNA scheme). As set out in answer to a parliamentary question on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the qualification required of an SNA is three passes at Junior Cycle, QQI level 3, or equivalent (see also NCSE, 2018b). The TUI is aware that these requirements are currently changing.

All schools should accept students regardless of the origins of the child. Schools can be supported in doing so through the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. Whilst most discussion about the Act has been about the 'baptism barrier' and quotas relating to children of former students, less note has been made of the critical power in the Act that would allow the NCSE to require schools to take students with SEN. This should lead to a more level playing field for students with SEN. Interestingly, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills (2018) found evidence of 'soft barriers' about the enrolment of children with SEN in some schools.

Recent changes in guidance provision and middle management posts also are a very small step in supporting students with SEN. However, the middle management structure in our schools has not been fully restored, which negatively impacts the service available to those with special needs. Teachers should be able to access CPD to best support students with SEN. Schools should be able to access support from the significantly under-pressure support services. It is also essential to ensure that all forms of education are available to the child and that the deciding factor is in their best interests.

Most importantly, governments of all hues have failed to implement and fund the EPSEN Act. The DE must make clear if it ever intends to implement and resource the EPSEN Act fully. If the DE cannot implement and resource EPSEN as initially planned, we ask that NCSE and the DE join with us in examining other options that will support students to achieve better outcomes for the student?

Provision of special schools and special classes should continue to exist until a viable and fully resourced alternative can be provided.

The TUI supports the current pilot School Inclusion Model component whereby OTs and SLTs are located in schools to support students and staff directly. The TUI would welcome the research into the implications of the greater roll-out of this model of in-school support whilst reserving our judgement on the overall programme. The TUI notes that many of the OTs/SLTs have been redeployed to essential Covid-related school support roles. Whilst recognising the national emergency in which we currently find ourselves, the TUI hopes that these healthcare professionals will soon be available to be deployed again in schools.

The COVID pandemic has come with its issues for the special needs student and their teachers. The NCSE must, as a matter of urgency, undertake a review of the challenges that have been encountered and provide a policy document outlining best practices that will help school leaders and staff to deal with a similar outbreak in the future.

Concerning the Resource Allocation Model, the TUI has previously and continues to have concerns about resourcing of the programme. Whilst significant resources have been spent thus far, it should also be noted how students numbers, especially in post-primary, continue to rise year-on-year. It is impossible to provide adequate support to increasing numbers of students "within existing resources," so the TUI would ask the NCSE, and indeed the DE, to take this into account.

In relation to the so-called Total Inclusion Model, or the sometimes nicknamed 'New Brunswick/Portuguese' model, the TUI has previously stated that it is in support of full inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream education unless the needs of the child are such that the child's needs are best served in a special class or school setting. As stated above, special schools and special classes should continue to exist until a viable, fully resourced alternative can be provided.

### **Conclusion**

The TUI believes that the NCSE has a significant role in supporting students with SEN and their schools. The newly revised strategy document must address the following;

- Significant investment is needed in services that support schools. Many of these services may be outside the direct remit of the NCSE, or indeed the DE. However, the fact that these services struggle with unmanageable caseloads, despite the best efforts of the staff involved, means that schools struggle to access support when they need it.
- The NCSE must also engage with union representatives on any matters of industrial relations, and the TUI reserves the right to refer issues to the appropriate industrial relations fora as required.
- The TUI calls again for full implementation and resourcing of the EPSEN Act.
- The TUI calls for the continuation of special classes and schools until the time comes when full inclusion into mainstream schools of all students with SEN becomes viable.
- The TUI calls for all schools to be genuinely representative of their communities in catering for those with special need.
- The TUI believes that the NCSE should support students with SEN as they transition into FET/HE. NCSE must seek to be present as a valued stakeholders at NCCA and DFFHERIS
- The plight of students with SEN, and the efforts of schools to support them, would be further eased if there was adequate pastoral care support in schools, such as guidance and middle management posts.

- Restoration of the SEN allowance is necessary to encourage teachers to engage in specialised postgraduate education.

**Ends**

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