



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

**INTO Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee
on Education and Skills**

The Delivery of services for students with Down syndrome

8 March 2019

1. Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), founded in 1868, is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents more than 40,000 primary level teachers in the Republic of Ireland and both primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland.

2. Support for Pupils with Down Syndrome

Children with Down syndrome attend both special and mainstream schools. Their educational placement is determined by their needs and by the choice of their parents. The learning ability of children with Down syndrome varies from severe and profound general learning disability to mild general learning disability. Therefore, the learning needs of children with Down syndrome also vary. Children with Down syndrome who attend special schools are in classes of approximately 6 to 8 pupils. Children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools could be in classes of 30 pupils or more and usually receive additional support from the learning support / special education team.

A new model for allocating special education teachers to mainstream schools to support children with special educational needs, was introduced in 2017. The number of additional teachers / teaching hours to support children with special educational needs is determined by schools' educational profiles. Schools' profiles are determined by schools' social context, the gender of pupils, the results of standardised tests and the number of children with complex special educational needs. The new definition of complex special educational needs is inclusive of children who access or who are waiting for access to the HSE Disability teams. Children with Down syndrome are normally identified at birth. Therefore, children with Down syndrome are likely to be supported by the HSE early intervention disability teams.

Decisions are made at school level regarding how much additional support children with special educational needs are given and on what form such additional support should be provided. Support at school levels varies from in-class support, where class teachers and special education teachers engage in term teaching, to the withdrawal of small groups of children for more intensive support. Occasionally children may receive individual teaching. The form additional support takes will depend on the needs of the child and may vary depending on the age of the child, the time of the year, or the focus of additional support, e.g. literacy and numeracy, emotional or behavioural support.

Parents are consulted when additional support is being provided for children with special educational needs and would be expected to have an input into pupils' individual education planning. Even if not called an IEP, some form of individual planning for the education of pupils with special educational needs takes place in schools. This is most often the case in special schools and classes. In the case of children in mainstream schools, individual plans are usually prepared for aspects of the children's education where they are receiving additional support. In some cases, individual planning may address all aspects of the curriculum. In other cases individual planning will address specific aspects of the curriculum, e.g. literacy and/or numeracy, or other areas where children need support such as behaviour. Individual plans may contain objectives or targets and are periodically reviewed.

The greatest lacuna in support for children with special educational needs, including children with Down syndrome, is the lack of therapy supports. Children with special educational needs often require speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, or other supports such as behavioural therapy, counselling. The INTO welcomes the piloting of a model for providing school-based therapy

services. Not all children with Down syndrome required additional therapies, but when they do, these supports should be available, regardless of whether the children attend special or mainstream schools.

Older children with Down syndrome should have access to career guidance regarding post-school options available to them.

The Special Education Support Service (SESS), now part of NCSE provide professional development opportunities for teachers in the area of special education. While the SESS provide very valuable and high quality professional development it is insufficient. In addition to courses and seminars, there is a need to develop in-school sustained support. All newly qualified teachers have studied special and inclusive education as part of their initial teacher education courses, but it is important that teachers have opportunities throughout their careers to continue their learning and development in the area of special education. The certificate and diploma courses provided by colleges of education / university schools of education are highly regarded, but are only accessible to teachers in special education posts. Given the policy focus on inclusion, all teachers should have access to certificate and diploma level courses in special education.

3. Summer Provision

Summer provision during July was initially introduced for pupils with severe and profound general learning disabilities following the O'Donoghue case in the courts in 1993. The rationale for introducing summer provision was that children with severe and profound general learning disabilities needed continuity and consistency in their education in order to progress. Offering summer provision during July was seen as enabling continuity, and allowing for as little interruption as possible in the education of children with severe and profound general learning disabilities. Summer / July provision was extended to children with Autism following the publication of the report of the Task Force on Autism in 2001.

From a practical perspective, summer / July provision is problematic. In terms of continuity for children, it is rarely the child's class teacher who provides the educational programme during July for the relevant pupils. The July educational programme is usually a separate educational programme, rather than a continuance of the education curriculum followed during the academic year. This is often to allow for a change in routine, to focus on social skills and to offer additional educational experiences not possible during the school year. In many cases the July programme is provided in the child's home rather than in the school, where a school decided not to provide summer provision. Therefore, the original intention of continuity and minimising the potential of academic regression, as understood in the O'Donoghue judgement, is not always available or possible.

There are also challenges pertaining to pay and employment. Teachers who are employed to teach during July provision often don't receive payment until November. The allowance for principal teachers who facilitated July provision in their schools was cut during the recession, leaving no incentive for a school to provide July provision. There is a lot of organisation in providing educational provision during July. Where July provision is provided in a child's home, the parent becomes the employer of the teacher. Guidelines regarding appropriate curricula and educational programmes and activities are not available, and expectations of parents in relation to what might be available during July programmes may not be met.

Notwithstanding, the original intentions, the July provision is very valuable educationally for children with severe and profound general learning disabilities and for children with ASD. However, the fact that July provision is confined to children with severe and profound general learning disabilities and

children with ASD is seen as excluding other children with learning disabilities, such as children with Down syndrome.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE 2015) in its policy advice on the education of children with ASD recommended that July provision be reviewed. There are many practical issues to be addressed regarding July provision, such as who should be entitled to additional educational provision during the summer, what the nature of summer educational programmes supported by the State should be, and practical arrangements pertaining to curriculum, employment and location. The INTO welcomes the proposal to review July provision, both its operation and its purpose.

4. Conclusion

Children with Down syndrome thrive in schools, whether special or mainstream, where teachers are have appropriate professional development in relation to the education of children with Down syndrome and where the appropriate supports are in place.