



AUTISM PROVISION SETTING UP NEW UNITS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) recently conducted a nationwide survey on Autism provision. The survey findings reflect the professional views and opinions of almost 300 Principals of Special Schools and Mainstream schools with Autism Units and Special Classes attached. This valuable bank of information will inform IPPN policy in relation to the establishing, staffing and resourcing of these Special Classes in the coming years. As a follow on from the survey, a targeted group of experienced Principals were asked to reflect on, and put forward suggestions as to how a streamlined, step by step process for the establishment of new Classes/Units might be put in place. The following criteria were put forward by the Working Group as worthy of consideration in the future..

1.1. LOCATION

- It is highly recommended that the names and addresses of all children diagnosed with ASD should be held on a central data base which should be established as a matter of priority
- All Boards of Management in a particular area where a need is identified should be invited to host a class/unit
- IPPN recommend that Special Classes be sited at least 20k apart in rural areas
- Principals of all schools in an area where a need for a Class/Unit is identified should be consulted prior to a mainstream host being selected
- In urban areas, units/classes should be established based on projected numbers and needs
- NCSE should make final decision as to the host school if a number of schools indicate a willingness to accommodate a class/unit
- Rural schools of 4 mainstream classes or less, by the nature of their narrow pupil base are restricted in their ability to effectively integrate more than one class of children with ASD i.e. 6 pupils
- All schools with less than 178 pupils taking on a class/unit and/or preschool should have a Principal with administrative status reflecting the significantly increased workload associated with such classes/units. While progress has been made on this issue, there are still a small number of schools with Special Classes (not just Autism alone) that have Principals with full time teaching duties. As a matter of urgency, this small number of Principals must be released from teaching duties so as to be in a position to effectively oversee the provision of the best possible learning interventions in the Special Class. This release from teaching duties should NOT be contingent on an expressed willingness on behalf of the Board to take on a second class (i.e. a Unit),as a Unit is totally unsustainable in schools of this size. IPPN research has identified lack of administrative supports and time to administer as the greatest problem facing Principals. At the very least, Teaching Principals in a school with an Autism Class should have 40 release days per year as an interim measure to reduce workload.

1.2. STAFFING & TRAINING

- Fully qualified teacher to be in place at least 3 months prior to the opening of the special class
- Induction Course of one weeks duration for Principals of schools where there is agreement to locate a unit/class. This training should facilitated by the SESS
- Special Needs Assistant(s) to be in place one month prior to the class accepting pupils

- Teacher and SNA(s) to have received recognised Autism Specific training prior to the class accepting pupils
- Development of a Post Graduate Diploma / Masters degree course in ASD provision to enhance provision
- IPPN surveys of Principals of Special Classes show a desire for a special class pupil teacher ratio of 4:1 (IPPN Autism Provision Survey April 2008)
- Training should consist of modules on classroom organisation, planning, record keeping, IEPs, and reporting to parents. Training should also be provided in manual lifting, first aid and challenging behaviour
- Only qualified personnel i.e. Primary teaching qualification B.Ed or H. Dip/University Diploma in Special Education should lead special class for children with Autism. A teaching qualification should be the basic requirement

1.3. BUILDING/INFRASTRUCTURE

- A building spec should be drawn up with uniform facilities for all new classes/units
- In a school of 178 pupils and over subject to space and other essential facilities being available, an Autism specific pre-school should be located on the same campus as the mainstream unit
- This pre-school should ideally be managed by the BoM, publicly funded, and staffing should be included in the whole school staffing levels
- The ideal unit should make provision for a 20% increase in classroom size from the current specifications being used, a common general purpose/life skills areas accessible from all classrooms, parents room, occupational therapy room/speech and language room, meeting room/speech and language room, soft play area, wash room, toilet area with hoist/ shower etc. A Sensory room and Sensory garden should be accessible from the general purpose/life skills area
- The Autism Unit in the mainstream school should ideally be sited to give a feeling of inclusiveness rather than be situated in a location removed from the mainstream building allowing the children with ASD the facility to access the building through the same entrance as the mainstream children

1.4. SERVICES

- Prior to the opening of an ASD Unit a school should have access to all of the following services:
 - Toolkit for formal assessments
 - A dedicated educational psychologist
 - A dedicated speech and language therapist
 - A dedicated occupational therapist
 - Physiotherapy, Psychiatry and Behavioural Specialist hours on a needs basis
 - Play therapy
 - Opportunities for Art and Music Therapy
 - There is a pressing need for the HSE and the DES to work together more effectively to co ordinate services

1.5. FUNDING

According to the recent IPPN survey on Autism provision, Principals state that expenditure on classroom equipment, field trips/travel and life skills are the biggest drain on school finances. 48% of schools engage in fundraising to support the activities of the special classes for ASD. 70% of classes run at an annual deficit of €5,000 and 21% of classes are subsidised by the BoM of the mainstream school for amounts ranging between €5,000 and €10,000.

- Principals estimate that units are under funded by approximately €2,500 per child
- Classroom specific resources for children with Autism, because of their durable nature, are extremely expensive
- As children with ASD progress through the classes, age appropriate resources must be purchased annually
- By the time children with ASD are ready to transfer to a new placement much of this expensive equipment needs to be renewed
- No grants, with the exception of the €6,500 start up grant are payable to schools with special classes for children with Autism
- No funding is available to schools to cover essential life skills expenditure eg foodstuffs, clothing, detergents, bus travel etc.
- No allowance is given to schools with units to cover mounting energy bills associated with life skills provision e.g. electricity bills for cookers, washing machines, driers etc.
- No funding is available for the purchase of cookers, microwaves, washing machines, dryers, dishwashers etc, essential to life skills provision
- The capitation grant of €864 per child with ASD is wholly inadequate
- The capitation grant for July provision meets only 20% of the cost of the programme. July Provision is resource hungry and involves an increased level of out of school activities and life skills activities
- There is no uniformity in the funding of special classes across the country – some schools receive consultancy grants, others don't. A small number of schools received a 'special equipment grant' in late 2005 but the majority did not even know that €1.2m had been allocated for this purpose. Most Special Classes have still not received this grant
- Special interventions such as water play and equine therapy are not funded at present
- Provision should also be made for funding of other interventions such as play therapy off-campus for social/motor interaction, cinema and theatre trips and life skills activities such as visits to the local post office/shopping centre, etc

1.6. TRANSPORT

- Transport arrangements for children with ASD and other disabilities are currently not cost effective...particularly taxi services that ferry one or two children and require the additional cost of an escort
- Serious consideration should be given to allowing parents who are in a position to do so, to transport their own children to their designated school for a set fee per mile rather than have this practice on an ad hoc basis as it currently is. Escort costs would be eliminated, insurance considerations would become the responsibility of the parents, long periods spent in a vehicle would be considerably reduced as there would be no pick up stops and parents would have an incentive to place their child/ren in the nearest most appropriate school
- Where taxis/buses have to be utilised, appropriate routes should be carefully mapped with no child having to spend more than 40 minutes in a vehicle on any single trip. Children living in close proximity to each other should be grouped together for transportation on the one vehicle
- Special Needs Assistants could double as Escorts in some circumstances to avoid duplication of costs particularly in the case of special needs children on a partial or infant day
- Consideration should be given to the concept of each Special Needs Unit having its own means of transportation. This initiative could be financed from the Dormant Accounts Fund through the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
- Escorts should be paid from central funds rather than from a grant payable to the school to reduce the administrative burden on the Principal

1.7. SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANTS.

- The key to effective differentiation and integration is the availability of suitably qualified and motivated Special Needs Assistants. The present trend of identifying areas where SNA provision can be reduced or eliminated, must not be permitted to affect the staffing ratios in ASD Units
- The attractiveness of the role of SNA can be attributed to a generous salary structure, which compares very favourably to the starting salary of a fully qualified teacher without the same level of accountability or responsibility. A system that retains the level of SNA support in schools with reduced payroll implications should be examined
- SNA support should always be provided on a needs basis rather than on a fixed ratio basis
- The allocation of additional, fully qualified teachers to Units/Classes could significantly reduce the need for large numbers of SNAs

1.8. INTEGRATION & INCLUSION

- Appropriate mainstream integration is vital for children with ASD. Schools should be supported in this process through enhanced General Allocation ratios, the appointment of Autism specific Regional SENOs and reduced pupil-teacher ratios
- Schools with Autism Units engaging in mainstream integration should have clearly defined maximum class sizes to define boundaries, particularly in the case of a Section 29 Appeal*

CONCLUSION

The setting up of classes for children with ASD in Mainstream schools has proven to be quite successful. This is due in no small measure to the professionalism and positive attitudes to inclusion displayed by Principals and staffs throughout the country. However, Principals must be incentivised to take on these classes otherwise there is the danger that many classes could end up being located in inappropriate settings. Motivated and willing leadership is crucial to the continued success of these classes and in that regard the Principal must be given every support possible to ensure that the overall investment delivers maximum outcomes.