



Submission to the National Council for Special Education

Statement of Strategy 2027 - 2030

May 2026

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Introduction

IPPN thanks the NCSE for the opportunity to provide input to its strategy for the 2027-2030 period. Supporting children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is an area in which school leaders and staff demonstrate deep commitment, professionalism and care, working every day to create school communities that are inclusive, welcoming and responsive to the needs of all children and their families. School leaders take great pride in fostering environments where every child can participate, belong and thrive. While this work brings considerable complexity and demands, it also reflects the dedication of schools to continually strengthen teaching, learning and supports for students with SEN in partnership with families and the wider education system.

While the submission format is based around three key questions, and we do answer these questions in the survey, this submission also set outs the key challenges relating to SEN and the actions required to address them. To do otherwise would be remiss as a network of principals and deputy principals.

IPPN's role as the professional body for school leaders is to empower the principals and deputy principals of primary and special schools to focus on their core purpose, and what they are qualified and skilled to do: the leadership and management of teaching and learning in their schools. This includes the 54% of principals and 98% of deputy principals who teach full-time on top of leadership and management responsibilities, which is often forgotten.

IPPN fully supports the principle of ensuring equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners, alongside their siblings and friends in the local area in which they live. Where a child enrolling in a school has special educational needs, the provision required to meet those needs should be planned proactively, appropriately supported and fully resourced. Access to suitable educational provision should not be constrained by:

1. lack of preparation time due to legislation limiting the admission application process
2. budgetary limitations or uncertainty regarding funding and resources
3. a lack of available capacity or appropriate provision within the local school or area

4. delays in the delivery, adaptation or approval of suitable accommodation and facilities
5. eligibility thresholds or numerical requirements, including the requirement to have a minimum of six children to establish a special class.

Scale of Need

It is widely agreed internationally that education systems will need to accommodate the additional needs of up to 5% of the population. This would mean that every 8-classroom school would require at least one special class; in 2-stream schools, two classes would be needed, and so on. While there are already more than 3,000 special classes in our primary schools, far more classes will be needed and detailed planning and resourcing has to be accelerated and enhanced to meet the demand.

In practice, the profile of special educational needs within school communities is far more varied and complex than current models of provision can sometimes accommodate. Children with SEN are not evenly distributed across catchment areas, nor do their needs fall into a single category or support model. While autism-specific provision is critically important, not all children with autism require a special class placement, and many other categories of need also require appropriate and flexible supports.

Schools of all types and sizes across the country are responding to an increasingly diverse range of needs and, in the vast majority of cases, are committed to welcoming and supporting every child seeking enrolment. School leaders and staff consistently strive to provide an equitable and inclusive educational experience for all pupils. However, the level of resourcing and system capacity has not kept pace with the growing and evolving demands being placed on schools. As a result, children, families, teachers and wider school communities are too often left managing the consequences of gaps in provision, delays in support and insufficient capacity within the system.

A budget-driven 'deficit model' is at the heart of the issues we hear about from school leaders. Special needs are either met or they are not and, if not, there is a consequential impact not only on the child with special needs but also on the other children in the class. If the level of resources made available within the system are dictated by budgetary constraints, then it cannot be claimed that special education educational needs are fully met. It can merely be asserted that special educational need is met only to the level allowed by the budget allocated for it. This has been the case in the Irish education system for years.

IPPN conducted research with school leaders in relation to Special Education Needs provision in mainstream schools in late 2025 and in special schools in Spring 2026. The findings confirm the deficits.

Mainstream Schools Allocations

SET Allocations

The Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation model seeks to ensure that resources are distributed to schools across the country based on that school's specific needs and context, rather than solely on individual diagnoses.

The average percentage of children in schools who are availing of either School Support or School Support Plus (per the continuum of support) from a Special Education Teacher is 38.64%. This is far in excess of the 25% estimated figure used by government to inform the budgetary allocation for Special Education.

78.44% said that their school's allocation of SET hours was not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs. As a result of this insufficient allocation, 83.75% reported that there were children in the school who required the support of a Special Education Teacher but were unable to avail of such support.

The average percentage level of increase in hours that would be required to sufficiently meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs is 22.03%. This would indicate that 18,000+ SET posts are required to meet the actual level of need that presents in schools as opposed to the 15,000+ SET posts that are sanctioned for 2026/27.

SNA Allocations

The average percentage of children in schools who have an identified care need with which they need support from a Special Needs Assistant is 23.38%. 61.58% said the school's allocation of SNA posts was not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who present with identified care needs. 85.76% reported that there are children in the school who require the support of a Special Needs Assistant, but who are unable to avail of such support.

School leaders reported that an average increase of 1.85 additional SNA posts would be required in order to adequately meet the needs of pupils currently enrolled. These findings point

to the need for continued investment in, and review of, SNA provision to ensure that schools are appropriately resourced to support children effectively and inclusively.

Publication of the SNA circular and relevant documentation outlining the role of the SNA will provide long-awaited clarity to school leaders and their staff.

Special Schools Allocations

A small majority of special school leaders (52.50%) indicate the school’s allocation of teaching posts is either somewhat sufficient or sufficient to meet the educational needs of students.

77.31% indicate that the baseline allocation of SERC SNA posts is either somewhat insufficient or insufficient to meet the needs of students. 57.03% indicate that the Above SERC allocation of SNA posts is either somewhat insufficient or insufficient to meet the needs of students. The combination of these two statistics highlights a fundamental lack of staffing capacity within special schools to ensure the needs of students are met.

The lack of sufficiency of weekly post-primary co-operation hours and weekly part-time subject specialist post-primary hours suggests that the capacity to meet the educational needs of students pursuing post-primary programmes is compromised.

Please indicate the extent to which the different elements of the school's allocation of teaching and SNA resources are sufficient to meet the needs of the students.					
Element	Sufficient	Somewhat sufficient	Somewhat insufficient	Insufficient	Not applicable
Teaching posts	19.17%	33.33%	20.00%	27.50%	00.00%
Weekly post-primary co-operation hours	11.76%	21.01%	10.92%	35.29%	21.01%
Weekly part-time subject specialist post-primary hours	04.35%	13.04%	13.04%	32.17%	37.39%
SERC SNA posts	03.36%	15.97%	10.92%	66.39%	03.36%
Above SERC SNA posts	09.09%	24.79%	21.49%	35.54%	09.09%

The only realistic approach to identifying the full extent of need is to allow schools to self-report on the level of need in their schools and to provide the funding to meet that need.

Other challenges

1. When a new special class is announced, there is often a lack of time to ready the school and the special class to support the children enrolling.
2. Resourcing for refurbishment, building projects, equipment and other supports is not adequate to meet the identified needs.
3. Pressures are being brought to bear on some schools to open additional special classes when other schools in the same catchment area do not have any. Others are being pressured to enrol a 7th and even an 8th child with additional need into classes designed for no more than 6 children. Where such approaches are taken, at the very least schools need to be provided with emergency measures to enhance the SET allocation to meet the needs of the children being accommodated, until such time as a new special class place opens up, or a new special class is built.

Response to Key Questions

How might the NCSE's goals be developed to ensure they reflect our work over the next four years?

The following comment by one school leader encapsulates the required goals and actions succinctly:

“The NCSE needs to embed practice and structure that will ensure that:

- 1. children, not funds, are placed at the heart of allocations*
- 2. communication with individual schools is clear*
- 3. timelines are clear (e.g. it will take 'n' days to process your query)*
- 4. the NCSE has adequate structures and capacity in place to ensure that NCSE staff can support schools effectively and make and communicate decisions in a fair and timely fashion.”*

It would be helpful to set out the underlying principles and assumptions behind the mission, vision, goals and actions. For example, IPPN would expect the following principles to be the basis of the strategy and plans of the NCSE:

1. Inclusive education is understood in its widest sense with the goal of enabling participation, raising achievement, supporting well-being and creating a sense of belonging for all learners, including those most vulnerable to exclusion.
2. NCSE supports the principle of ensuring effective, equal access to quality, inclusive education for all learners.
3. Prioritising access to inclusive education in an appropriate setting for one cohort of children with additional needs, in such a way that it compromises access for another cohort of children with additional needs to inclusive education in an appropriate setting, is not equitable. This applies equally to special class and special school provision.
4. With specific reference to the opening of special classes, all schools have a responsibility in this regard.
5. Inclusion is planned for, supported and adequately resourced by all relevant services in accordance with the actual level of need that presents within the system.
6. If that is the case, there is no reason why any child who meets the criteria for placement in a special class cannot attend the same national school as their brother or sister

7. The numbers of children presenting with additional needs who meet the criteria for placement have increased significantly in recent years and will continue to do so in the coming years.
8. The capacity of NCSE (SENOs/Team Managers/practitioners/therapists) will be developed to ensure manageable caseloads and enhanced engagement and relationships with schools.
9. School staff will receive adequate training both in challenging behaviour and in effective strategies for planning, teaching and assessment in a timely manner to better ensure they have the expertise to meet the needs of children in special class settings
10. Special class settings will be in keeping with DEY technical guidelines and specifications.
11. Ease of communication with NCSE. School leaders and their staff constantly report issues getting through on the phones to discuss areas of concern or seek clarification on particular issues.
12. Review the reasons for the lack of parental confidence in mainstream settings resulting in the significant increase in applications for special settings.

Are there core areas or key goals missing? We note that goals linked to the ETS will be developed in our new strategy.

The NCSE stated mission is clear *'We will drive the realisation of an inclusive education with integrated research, policy and practice. Our skilled and committed staff will work with students, schools and communities to provide access to quality learning and opportunities.'* To deliver on this mission, the goals need to focus as much on the 'realisation' element as on the research, policy and practice. Providing access to quality learning and opportunities also requires a focus on developing capacity within NCSE and across schools, delivering training where it's needed, when it's needed, providing resources and ensuring equity of provision across all schools to support all children with SEN.

Further, to achieve the current NCSE vision 'A world class inclusive education system for Ireland', the key goals and actions that school leaders would like to see reflected in the NCSE Strategy for 2027-2030:

1. To put the child at the heart of every decision made by the NCSE

2. To further increase the capacity of NCSE to provide support and guidance to schools to meet the need presenting on the ground in schools.
3. To ensure that SENOs are knowledgeable about and confident in the systems, circulars and Teacher Professional Learning made available by the NCSE.
4. In conjunction with the DEY, to provide resources, supports and guidance to schools to ensure that every child in every school has equal chance of achieving his/her/their potential
5. To further simplify all procedures to remove duplication, centralise documentation and reduce the timescales for decision-making to an absolute minimum
6. To provide CPD for all NCSE staff who engage with schools – to raise awareness of how different types of primary school operate and what they deal with day to day - to improve consistency of decision-making and to ensure equity across all schools in terms of resourcing
7. To progress the wellbeing/mental health/counselling pilot projects to nationwide roll-out, taking into account the learning from the pilot stage to fully support implementation in all types of primary and special school
8. To provide CPD for all school staff who engage with children with SEN
9. To build inclusion best practice in ITE programmes in all teacher training colleges.
10. To oversee and review the new special school placement for initial teacher education in order to drive improvement and strive for excellence.

Are there specific objectives and actions that should be reflected within these goals?

1. Continued investment in high-quality, accessible and appropriately structured professional development for teachers and SNAs supporting children with special educational needs. Schools require clear and consistent communication regarding available CPD opportunities, alongside dedicated funding and release time to enable meaningful participation.
2. Ongoing engagement and collaboration with ITE providers to ensure that student teachers are equipped with evidence-based inclusive teaching practices. This should include regular review and evaluation of the new special school placement element within ITE programmes to ensure it is meeting its intended objectives and supporting preparedness for inclusive education settings.

3. Regular review of the CPD and training provided to all NCSE staff to promote consistency, shared understanding and the implementation of best practice in engagement with schools, families and wider stakeholders.
4. Provision of timely, clear and accurate information to parents and guardians in relation to supports and services available, helping to ensure that expectations are aligned with the level of resources and provision available within schools and the wider system.
5. Greater transparency and clarity regarding the criteria applied to applications for funding, equipment, staffing and other supports. Schools would benefit from clearly communicated guidance outlining the documentation required to support applications, the processes involved, and indicative timelines for decisions and approvals.
6. Where schools have provided key information, that should be accepted as an accurate reflection of the school and its SEN/resourcing needs for a given period. To remove duplication and simplify processes, schools should be asked to confirm whether anything material has changed since the last submission of information.
7. Frontload resources and supports to schools who are opening a new special class – to remove all the barriers for schools and children.

Key Challenges relating to SEN

The key challenges relevant to NCSE that impact schools' ability to provide high quality education for children with special needs can be grouped into three categories – funding and resourcing, processes and procedures, communication and decision-making. These need to inform NCSE strategic aims and objectives.

Funding and Resourcing

A recurring theme emerging from IPPN members' feedback and queries in relation to the NCSE Strategy is the concern that the needs of children are not consistently central to decision-making processes. Many school leaders perceive that decisions relating to supports and provision are too often shaped primarily by available funding rather than by the level and complexity of identified need within schools and communities.

School leaders report a significant gap between the expectations placed on schools to provide high-quality, inclusive educational experiences for children with additional needs and the level of resourcing made available to enable schools to meet those expectations effectively. While schools are fully committed to delivering the best possible outcomes for all children, this commitment must be matched by adequate and timely investment in staffing, specialist supports, equipment, learning resources, accommodation and professional development for teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

As outlined under the section on Scale of Need, many school leaders consider current SEN allocations and supports to be insufficient to meet the needs presenting in schools.

Another significant issue highlighted by many school leaders is the perception that current models of support place a stronger emphasis on primary care needs than on complex behavioural and emotional support needs. While care needs are critically important, school leaders report that insufficient recognition is often given to the significant impact that complex behavioural needs can have on a child's ability to engage fully in learning and achieve their potential.

These needs can also present considerable challenges for teachers and school staff in maintaining supportive and effective learning environments for all pupils. Where appropriate supports, staffing and specialist interventions are not available, the impact can extend beyond the individual child to the wider classroom environment and school community. School leaders therefore believe that behavioural and emotional support needs should be more fully recognised and reflected within allocation models, training provision and access to specialist supports.

Children with mild and moderate learning difficulties would potentially benefit from enrolment in a special class designed to meet their needs, as many do not cope very well in larger classes as they don't have adequate access to an SNA.

Schools report that acquiring specialist therapeutic supports for children is very onerous and time-consuming and often requires liaison with several service providers to meet the needs of an individual child. The pilot project underway in special schools – whereby speech and language, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and other such therapies – are administered centrally and provided within schools needs to be rolled out nationally, to provide more wrap-around support services to schools.

NCSE has a role in advocating for provision to be made by the Departments of Public Expenditure & Reform, Education & Youth, and Finance to meet the needs presenting on the ground in schools.

SET Allocations

The timing of allocation notifications continues to present significant challenges for schools in planning effectively for the academic year ahead. In 2025 and 2026, mainstream schools received their Special Education Teacher (SET) allocations in February and March respectively. However, special schools did not receive summaries of Teaching and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) allocations until 16 June 2025 and, as of 21 May 2026, had yet to receive confirmation for the forthcoming school year. Hospital schools similarly did not receive allocation information for the 2025/26 school year until the end of June 2025.

Late notification of allocations creates considerable uncertainty for schools and undermines effective planning, recruitment and organisation of supports. It also places unnecessary strain on school leaders, staff, children and families at a critical point in the school planning cycle. Timely communication of allocations is essential to ensure that schools can recruit and retain staff, organise supports appropriately and provide continuity and certainty for pupils and families.

A cutoff of the February mid-term needs to be put in place for all schools – mainstream, special, hospital - to receive both SET and SNA allocations.

SNA Allocations

The work currently underway on SNA Workforce Development is very positive and will lead to more clarity and coherence across schools, boards of management, management bodies, unions and others, in how SNAs are supported, deployed and trained.

The timing of SNA allocations also needs to be brought forward to allow for adequate planning, recruitment and redeployment, well before the end of the school year. Mainstream schools received notification of their SNA allocation on 25th May 2025 and have yet to receive it in 2026, less than a month before the end of the school year in many schools. Again, this puts significant and unnecessary pressure on school leaders, staff, parents and children and needs to be addressed. Timelines must be brought forward to ensure timely notification to schools to complete all necessary recruitment and preparation well ahead of school closures at the end of June.

Earlier notification timelines are essential to ensure that schools can complete recruitment processes, plan supports effectively and make necessary preparations well in advance of school closures at the end of June. Greater certainty and consistency in the allocation process would support improved continuity for pupils and staff alike.

As outlined previously, concerns also remain regarding the basis on which SNA allocations are determined. School leaders report that allocations do not always reflect the level of identified

need within schools but are instead constrained by an overall capped allocation determined through the annual budgetary process. Given the rising incidence and complexity of special educational needs presenting in schools, there is a growing concern that current allocation levels are not keeping pace with demand.

There is a need for ongoing CPD for SNAs, particularly in the area of behaviours of concern. Such CPD could be provided more effectively and efficiently by providing CPD to whole school communities in catchment areas, rather than individually to small cohorts.

Processes and Procedures

Despite ongoing efforts to streamline processes, school leaders continue to experience significant challenges in relation to administrative burden, including repeated requests for information, complex application procedures, and delays in decision-making. These issues contribute to frustration across schools and are particularly demanding for the approximately 54% of schools led by teaching principals, where leadership and teaching responsibilities are combined. A more streamlined system, underpinned by clear criteria and transparent guidance on what is required to demonstrate eligibility, would greatly enhance efficiency and benefit both schools and the system as a whole.

Schools also report considerable difficulty in planning effectively within current timelines. There is a clear need for defined and predictable timeframes governing applications to the NCSE for supports such as equipment, SNA provision, and case reviews. In addition, there is a need for greater clarity for both families and schools regarding what supports can reasonably be expected and the timelines within which decisions will be made.

In relation to planning cycles, it is important to recognise that July and August fall outside the operational school year for most staff. Schools should not be expected to manage recruitment, applications or administrative processes during periods of closure, and system timelines should be aligned accordingly to ensure that key processes are completed within the active school calendar.

Communication and decision-making

The time taken to get a decision made is a clear issue for schools. A clear timeline needs to be put in place with regard to all processes.

Managing parental expectations of what can be provided to meet the needs of a child is another key issue. Schools report that parents are told by the NCSE/SENO that the school has sufficient resourcing to meet the needs of their child, yet the school may have had several applications for resourcing, equipment etc. refused for that child. This is disingenuous and causes significant problems for schools. It could easily be avoided if the NCSE/SENO could be clear and honest about the capacity of the system to meet the individual needs of every child.

SENCO

Two thirds of school leaders report that the staff member with responsibility for coordinating SEN provision does not have designated leadership time allocated to this role. While the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is not formally recognised within Irish primary schools, it is nevertheless operating in practice on an informal basis across many schools.

There is clear evidence that, where this responsibility is assumed most commonly by deputy principals or other senior leaders, it plays a significant and positive role in shaping whole-school policy and practice in relation to SEN.

SENCOs operate as positive enablers in the school providing collaborative, supportive leadership in the area of SEN and empowering strong school SEN teams. They use collaborative and distributed approaches in leading SEN policy, identifying needs, identifying CPD requirements, undertaking CPD and providing internal CPD to colleagues, and act as a liaison between the school and NCSE. They adopt an advocacy role with families and are central to the development of pedagogical leadership in the school, making a significant difference to their colleagues, their pupils and their families.

In recent research SENCOs in our schools tell us there are many challenges including work overload, teaching duties as well as leading the area of SEN, insufficient time to carry out all of their duties, multiple responsibilities, limited external professional supports, and ambiguity in policy guidance.

To strengthen SENCO agency, leadership capacity and impact, it is recommended that this role be formally recognised within policy and clearly defined within the school leadership structure. This should include the allocation of ring-fenced leadership time and formal inclusion within the senior leadership team in schools.

SENCOs in Irish schools are increasingly operating as key drivers of change and as central points of expertise within the school system in relation to special educational needs. In practice, they play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive practice, supporting staff, and coordinating whole-school responses to SEN, as facilitators of effective provision within the school community.