

IPPN Opening Statement by
Deirdre Kelly, IPPN President
to the Joint Committee on Education & Youth

2nd July 2026

Chair, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network.

I am a teaching principal and, alongside my role representing IPPN, experience first-hand the realities of leading schools while teaching full-time. IPPN is acutely aware of both the opportunities and the challenges that exist in striving to provide an inclusive education for all children. We therefore welcome the Committee's focus on inclusive education and special educational needs provision.

IPPN is the officially recognised professional body for over 6,000 primary school principals and deputy principals. Through our engagement with school leaders across the country, we see an unwavering commitment to inclusion. School leaders, teachers, SNAs and wider school communities work tirelessly to ensure that every child is welcomed, supported and enabled to participate fully in school life.

The central message of our submission is straightforward. The challenge facing schools is not a lack of commitment to inclusion. The challenge is that the conditions necessary for effective inclusion do not currently exist in many schools.

Inclusive education must be understood in its broadest sense. It is about enabling participation, supporting wellbeing, raising achievement and fostering a genuine sense of belonging for every child. To achieve that, schools require adequate staffing, timely access to resources, appropriate training, specialist supports and sufficient leadership capacity. At present, there is a growing gap between policy ambition and operational reality.

In January 2026, IPPN surveyed more than 1,000 school leaders regarding the provision of additional educational supports in mainstream schools. The scale of that response provides a highly reliable picture of what is happening in schools.

The findings are stark.

Almost 80% of school leaders reported that their allocation of Special Education Teacher hours is insufficient to meet the needs of pupils requiring support. More than 60% reported that their allocation of Special Needs Assistants is insufficient to meet identified care needs. More than 83% reported that there are children in their schools who require SET support but cannot currently access it, while over 85% reported a similar situation regarding SNA support.

The consequence is that schools are regularly forced into impossible decisions about prioritisation. School leaders and special education teams are trying to stretch finite resources across growing and increasingly complex needs. When resources do not match need, support is delayed, intervention time is reduced and outcomes for children are compromised.

A key issue identified by our members is that current resource allocation models are driven largely by predetermined budgetary limits rather than by the actual level of need presenting in schools. Yet schools themselves hold much of the data required to accurately identify that need. If we are serious about inclusion, resource allocation must be informed by current evidence and actual demand.

We also wish to draw the Committee's attention to the increasing prevalence of behaviours of concern and crisis situations in schools. Our survey found that almost 65% of staff who responded to crisis situations had received no training before doing so. More than half of schools reported that a staff member had been injured while responding to a crisis incident.

School staff are committed to adopting neuro-affirmative and trauma-informed approaches, recognising that behaviour is communication. However, commitment alone is insufficient. Schools require access to training for all members of staff, as well as specialist supports and multidisciplinary services, if they are to respond safely and effectively.

Finally, we wish to highlight the leadership dimension of special education provision.

In most schools, responsibility for coordinating special educational needs provision falls to a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or a member of the leadership team. Yet in over 67% of schools, the person carrying out this responsibility receives no allocated leadership time whatsoever. In a further 22% of schools, that responsibility rests with a teaching principal who is already teaching full-time for most of the week.

The reality is that the successful coordination of special education provision depends heavily on goodwill and personal commitment. That is neither sustainable nor fair to schools, staff or children. The role of SENCO should be formally recognised, supported

and resourced, and school leaders must be provided with the time necessary to lead inclusion effectively.

In our submission, we make six key recommendations. These include moving to a needs-led resourcing model, guaranteeing timely allocations, increasing SET and SNA capacity, investing in behaviour and safety supports, establishing the role of SENCO on a statutory basis, and strengthening leadership capacity in schools.

Chair and Members, if the State aspires to provide a genuinely inclusive education system, then resources, staffing, training, specialist supports and leadership capacity must be aligned with the actual needs of children. School leaders are committed to delivering inclusion. Our message today is that they need the system around them to be equally committed.

Thank you, and we look forward to engaging with the Committee's questions.