

IPPN Submission to the

Joint Oireachtas Committee

on Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs Provision

2nd July 2026

Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Conducive Conditions for Effective Inclusion	4
The Current Reality.....	5
Impact on Provision	6
Behaviours of Concern	8
Leadership and Co-ordination of Special Education Provision	9
Recommendations	11
Conclusion	13

Introduction

IPPN recognises the specialist expertise, dedication and complexity involved in these settings and would welcome an opportunity at a later date to contribute a submission which focuses specifically on provision for children and young people attending special classes and special schools, in order to do justice to the importance of this area of education.

As the officially recognised network of primary school leaders in Ireland, IPPN articulates the professional insights and collective experience of over 6000 principals and deputy principals. Through supports & services and through advocacy, we work to to enhance school leadership practice in order to deliver better outcomes for children, schools, communities, and the wider education system.

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The Conducive Conditions for Effective Inclusion

It is IPPN's view that the conducive conditions for effective inclusion are as follows:

- 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.
- Equal access to a high-quality and inclusive education for all learners, in a setting appropriate to their needs, is a system priority.
- Such inclusion is planned for, supported and adequately resourced by all relevant services.
- The budgetary allocation for special education is based on accurate, up-to-date data in relation to the level of additional needs presenting in schools.
- Allocations of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools are aligned with the level of need that exists in the school.
- Allocations and resourcing need to be responsive to emerging need.
- Any transition from one setting to another (early years to primary, primary to post-primary, primary to special school, junior primary to senior primary or from one school to another) is particularly important and must be supported by advance planning, open communication and timely sharing of information.
- School staff have received adequate training and have the expertise to support all of the pupils who attend their school.
- Those who are leading and co-ordinating special education provision in the school have discrete leadership time to do so.

The Current Reality

In January 2026, IPPN conducted a survey on *Meeting Additional Education Needs in Mainstream Schools* to which over 1000 school leaders responded. Statistically, this constitutes an exceptionally significant sample size which ensures high confidence levels in the accuracy of the results. Accordingly, the responses of those school leaders clearly highlight the extent to which the conducive conditions for effective inclusion do not currently exist.

- Only **11.90%** agreed that the budgetary allocation for special education is based on accurate, up-to-date data in relation to the level of additional needs presenting in schools.
- **78.44%** said the school's allocation of SET hours was not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs.
- **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.
- Only **10.32%** agreed that school staff have access to the requisite training, supports and resources to equip them to work effectively in a special class setting.
- Only **10.05%** agreed that school staff have access to the requisite training, supports and resources to equip them to respond effectively to behaviours of concern.
- In **67.04%** of schools, the person leading and co-ordinating inclusion has absolutely no allocation of leadership time.

Impact on Provision

The issue raised by schools is the growing gap between policy ambition and the reality of the resources available to schools. The current system is fundamentally constrained by predetermined budget allocations rather than by the actual level of need that presents in schools. The biggest stumbling block to addressing this is the availability of reliable and up-to-date data. Schools have this data. We are operating currently on an assumption that 25% of children require additional support whereas schools tell us that the reality is more than 30%.

The new circular on the role of the SNA acknowledges the broader definition of core care needs being supported in schools, which will mean that the scale of need is even greater than the allocation that related to 'care needs' dating back to 2014.

School leaders consistently report that allocations of SET and SNA support are insufficient to meet identified needs. The consequence is that schools are forced into impossible decisions regarding prioritisation and the deployment of resources.

The allocation of SET hours to schools is illustrative in this regard:

- The average percentage of children in schools who are availing of support from a Special Education Teacher is **30.64%**.
- This is in excess of the **25%** estimated figure used by government to inform the budgetary allocation for Special Education.
- 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.
- A **22.05%** increase in hours would be required to sufficiently meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs.

- 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.

The impact of this operational deficit is reduced intervention time, delayed support, compromised outcomes for children and increasing pressure on school staff.

It is a similar picture when it comes to the allocation of SNAs:

- Schools report that the percentage of children who have an identified care need with which they need support from a Special Needs Assistant is **23.38%**.
- **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.
- The average increase in the number of SNA posts that would be required to sufficiently meet the identified care needs of the children in schools is **1.85 posts**.

The impact of this operational deficit is a lack of capacity to meet core care needs, to promote engagement and participation, to support transitions and to respond appropriately to behaviours of concern.

Behaviours of Concern

Schools operate on the guiding principle that all behaviour is communication and seek to interpret behaviours of concern as a child's attempt to express an unmet need, such as sensory overload, frustration, or a desire for connection. Such a neuro-affirmative and trauma-informed approach shifts the focus from reactive interventions to proactive, supportive strategies. However, the increased prevalence of behaviours of concern and crisis situations highlights a lack of capacity in schools. Deficits in staff allocations and training mean the use of de-escalation strategies to support regulation and render situations safe is compromised.

- In the last 12 months, **64.65%** of staff members who responded to crisis situations in schools had not received any training prior to the incident.
- **56.58%** of schools reported that a staff member had been injured when responding to a crisis situation.
- **37.37%** of special schools reported that staff members had been injured on 5 or more occasions with many indicating it was either a daily or weekly occurrence.

In light of the above, the proposed *train-the-trainer* model of building capacity in schools detailed in Circular 0042/2026, where a teacher in a school will receive training and will become an accredited trainer for their school, is a wholly inadequate system response to an urgent need in schools.

Leadership and Co-ordination of Special Education Provision

In Irish primary schools, a SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) is generally the teacher or school leader who coordinates and oversees special education provision. However, unlike some other jurisdictions such as England, the SENCO role is not formally defined in Irish education policy, and schools organise it in different ways.

Key responsibilities, identified within the research, include

- identification of children with SEN for administrative assessment
- fostering in-school collaboration and support for others
- determining resource allocation
- providing CPD for staff
- liaising with external agencies.

The research also identifies the significant leadership dimension to the role of SENCO, as they typically

- lead the development and review of school SEN policy
- are leaders of staff in SEN provision and school initiatives using collaborative school wide systems
- are leaders in the identification of children with additional needs
- are leaders in staff development and professional learning within the area of SEN.

IPPN's survey data confirms that in **67.04%** of schools, the person leading special education provision has **absolutely no allocation of leadership time**. In a further **22.55%**, the person

leading special education provision is a teaching principal who has full-time teaching responsibilities four days a week.

It is little wonder therefore that the research into the role of the SENCO in Ireland identifies significant challenges such as

- insufficient time
- heavy workloads
- multiple responsibilities
- limited external professional supports, and
- ambiguous policy guidance.

Relying on goodwill for the leadership of something as important and complex as special education provision is not a credible or sustainable policy position.

Recommendations

1. Move to a Needs-Led Resourcing Model

- Establish a national annual needs-identification process which is informed by the data held by schools.
- Ensure the budgetary allocation for special education is aligned to the level of identified need resources rather than predetermined budget limits.
- Publish national data annually on levels of educational, care and behavioural need.

2. Guarantee Timely Allocations

- Issue all SET and SNA allocations no later than February mid-term each year.
- Introduce a rapid-response mechanism where needs emerge during the school year.

3. Increase SET and SNA Capacity

- Increase SET & SNA allocations to reflect actual levels of need.
- Ensure no child with an identified educational or care need is left without access to support.

4. Invest in Behaviour and Safety Supports

- Provide mandatory training for all relevant staff.
- Expand behaviour support teams and multidisciplinary services.
- Ensure schools have timely access to specialist emergency behavioural supports.

5. Establish the Role of SENCO on a Statutory Basis

- Formally recognise the role of SENCO in education policy.

- Provide ring-fenced non-teaching coordination time.
- Include SENCOs within school leadership structures.
- Fund professional learning and leadership development.

6. Strengthen Leadership Capacity

- Increase release time for teaching principals.
- Provide dedicated leadership time for deputy principals.

Conclusion

If the State aspires to provide a genuinely inclusive education system that meets the individual needs of every child, then it must ensure that resource allocation is informed by an accurate understanding of need and that the necessary investment follows. Inclusion cannot be achieved through policy ambition alone; it requires the alignment of staffing, resources, training, specialist supports and leadership capacity with the realities experienced in schools every day.

Above all, access to an appropriate and inclusive education is not optional it is the statutory entitlement of every child.