



IPPN Submission on DEY draft document

Whole School Guidance in Special Schools

Prepared for:

The Department of Education and Youth

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Introduction

The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) is an official education partner of the Department of Education, and the professional network for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit, voluntary association, with a local, regional and national presence. IPPN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department's work on whole-school guidance in special schools.

Coming during the summer period when schools are closed, our response to the request for feedback has been impeded the level of consultation we would seek to have in order to present a thorough set of observations and feedback. We have done what we can in the time available to us at the busiest time of the year in the sector and hope that our feedback is useful to those developing the guidance.

In our deliberations, IPPN has engaged with NABMSE, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education and with individual school leaders in the special school sector. We are aware of the views being put forward by NABMSE and fully support its recommendations.

Observations and Recommendations

General Points

1. In general, the document reads well and is helpful in setting out the Department's approach to guidance in the special school sector. It does, however, read as a tweaked version of the approach to guidance in post-primary schools, rather than a resource and approach that has been developed from within, or with the support of, the special school sector itself.
2. Communities of Practice (local networks where teachers, school leaders and special education professionals meet to discuss shared challenges and goals) are in place, led by NCSE as part of its Teacher Professional Learning framework and supported by the Education Centre network. Have these CoPs been used to test out the proposed approach, plans and templates? If not, why not?
3. There is still an opportunity to ensure that this guidance is relevant to and suitable for special schools. Could an Implementation Action Group work on this with a pilot group, such as through the Communities of Practice that already exist?
4. A more all-encompassing description of the sector itself would clarify the relevance and pertinence of the guidance to what are very distinct sub-sectors. Special schools cater for students from 4 to 18 years of age. As well as supporting children with a wide variety of physical and intellectual disabilities, the special school sector also includes hospital schools, detention centre schools, prison schools, CAMHS and other support settings such as Youthreach, among others. These schools do not all fall under the remit of the Department of Education, some are under the remit of the Department of Health. This is

anomalous and needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. A failure to acknowledge the variety of contexts in special schools will mean that the guidance will not meet the requirements of these very specific and different settings.

5. Guidance in post-primary schools includes counselling and other ‘pastoral’ aspects of a school’s responsibility towards students. This element seems to be wholly missing in this document and is a fundamental omission.
6. The description of Guidance omits emotional development, other than a general reference to wellbeing. The centrality of emotional wellness to education is not clear with reference to the role of Guidance in schools. Indeed, the vulnerability of this cohort of children/students is at the heart of the need for guidance in the first place, and this needs to be central to the approach taken. For example, trauma is not mentioned anywhere in the document, yet special schools deal with trauma every day and it manifests in various ways. An approach to guidance in special schools that omits counselling in all special schools (as opposed to ‘guidance counsellors ‘where relevant’’) and trauma-informed education, and the training and supports required to deliver it, will not hit the mark in supporting the most vulnerable children in our society.
7. The document is very long, mostly due to the appendices. It needs to be shortened to include only what is directly relevant to the special school sector, and to avoid adding to the administrative burden in our schools. There is also an element of duplication that, if removed, would enhance readability and usefulness.

Leadership Capacity

1. The work overload of school leaders – and its professional and personal impact – has been well documented, by IPPN, DCU, Deakin University and NUI Maynooth – see Appendix 1. School leaders simply do not have capacity to take on an entire new area of work with all the attendant administration, consultation etc. without additional resourcing and support.
2. Currently there aren't any guidance counsellors, chaplains/pastoral staff or psychologists in special schools. These should be the people to lead the WSG plan, as they do in the post-primary mainstream sector. The current reality in special schools is that such a plan in a special school is led by the Principal/Deputy Principal, together with the class teacher. At a minimum, special schools must have access to qualified guidance counsellors and psychologists, either as an ex-quota post or on a call-off arrangement.
3. Smaller special schools carry a significant burden of responsibility dealing, as they do, with early intervention, primary and post-primary education, as well as the integration with and oversight of therapeutic resources.

Resourcing and supports to implement the Plan

1. The majority of special schools are relatively small, as staffing resources are based on the number of teachers appointed and exclude the significant number of SNAs in the school. Ex-quota posts do not typically exist in these schools. There is no transition teacher or equivalent, as is the case in post-primary. There may be one or two subject teachers employed under 'cooperation hours' for about five hours a week from September to May annually. If the expectations of

schools are the same as at post-primary, how then is this guidance to be implemented in practice?

2. To ensure successful implementation of the WSG Plan across all special schools, a guidance counsellor should be appointed to each special school, pro rata for smaller schools according to the methodology used in post-primary schools. At a minimum, special schools must have access to qualified guidance counsellors and psychologists, either as an ex-quota post or on a call-off arrangement.
3. What plan will be put in place for non-contact time to be factored in for teaching staff and SNAs? This is required to plan for and attend team meetings to plan and manage the needs of each individual child, including the development and review of realistic goals, and also to maintain high-quality records such as student support files. The engagement with all staff and external agencies is a factor here in terms of scheduling. This needs to include ETS in the relevant schools.
4. Minimising additional work for school leaders, teachers, staff and admin staff is paramount, if whole-school guidance is to become a reality on the ground across the special school sector, in all its contexts. For this reason, the indicated templates could be replaced altogether by amending student support plans to include guidance planning.
5. Unions representing school staff will look very carefully at any suggested additional responsibilities put forward in the guidance.

Transition planning

1. Guidance for transitions is needed throughout a child's life in a special school and each Transition stage (from pre-school to primary, primary to post-primary and onwards to further education or the workplace, where applicable).
2. Special schools are already adept at preparing resources for students from an early age. Children and young people with additional needs require much earlier intervention, with ongoing scaffolded support to help them adjust over time to change and transitions, and to new people and new stages in their lives.
3. The transition away from special school is a period of their lives when vital life decisions about a young person's future education, training and work possibilities are made, yet they are doing so without many of the supports provided for their peers in mainstream education.
4. These young people have to navigate a world which largely views them through a deficit lens. Their life journey is much more challenging than that of their peers. They are entitled to at least the same level of support provided to those peers in mainstream schools.

Conclusion

In summary, we present four key recommendations:

1. Further consultation with IPPN and the special school sector before guidance is issued
2. Pilot the WSG Plan with Communities of Practice
3. Resource the plan, including by the introduction of ex-quota post specifically for guidance as is the case in post-primary schools
4. Simplify the paperwork requirements and integrate with existing tools.

Appendix 1 – Relevant Research

Health and Wellbeing of School Leaders

Irish Primary School Leaders' Health and Wellbeing: A 3-year national study, Deakin University, 2024 [Link](#)

Educator Occupational Wellbeing Research 2026 - Phase Three: School Principals in the Republic of Ireland (Executive Summary), DCU Create, 2026 [Link](#)

Wellbeing in Post-Covid Schools: Primary school leaders' Reimagining of the Future, Maynooth University, 2001 [Link](#)

Sustainable Leadership in Irish Primary and Special Schools

Survey of School Leaders in Special Schools, IPPN 2026 [Link](#)

Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability, IPPN 2022 [Link](#)

Follow-up progress reports, IPPN:

- Progress Report 2024 [Link](#)
- Progress Report 2023 [Link](#)