

Educate Together Meeting with Minister Josepha Madigan, T.D.

Meeting date: Wednesday, 16th September 2020

Meeting venue: Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1

Attending for Educate Together

- Dr. Emer Nowlan, CEO Educate Together (in person)
- Sandra Irwin-Gowran, Head of Education and Development, Educate Together (in person)
- Dr. Alan Sheehan, Principal, Rochestown ETNS (video conferencing link)

Proposed Agenda

1. Educate Together and Inclusive Education
2. Resourcing Inclusive education
 - Staff allocation
 - Teacher capacity and education (ITE/CPD)
 - Parity in the system
3. Issues for developing schools
4. What Educate Together can offer?

Briefing information

Background on Educate Together

Educate Together is the representative body for 116 equality-based schools in Ireland. A registered charity Educate Together is the management body for 95 national schools and patron (or patron/trustee partner) of 21 post-primary schools, including voluntary secondary schools, community schools and community colleges.

In excess of 70% of Educate Together schools have opened since the landmark 2004 EPSEN Act which;

- Provides that people with special educational needs are educated in an inclusive environment, as far as possible
- Establishes that people with special educational needs have the same right to avail of and benefit from education as children who do not have those needs
- Provides for the greater involvement of parents in the education of their children and decision making

As the management body for the fastest growing sector of primary schools, Educate Together is committed to working closely with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and other partners to ensure the smooth running of the primary education system. As an equality-based school patron across primary and post-primary level, we teach a comprehensive Ethical Education curriculum, and we strive to ensure that every one of the 30,000 children and young people in our schools is supported to achieve their full potential. We are also working to increase access to Educate Together schools in order to meet the rapidly increasing demand for equality-based education, in line with government policy.

Educate Together is proud to have a reputation as an inclusive school network, welcoming students from a range of backgrounds and supporting every child to reach their full potential, whatever their educational needs. Educate Together national schools have a higher proportion of specialist Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes than other sectors (43% compared to 10% national average) and research conducted by the ESRI last year showed a higher proportion of students with additional needs in our post-primary schools than the national average.¹ This is particularly the case in developing schools that have not yet become oversubscribed and therefore present fewer barriers to access that are often experienced in securing school places in longer established schools.

However, the higher than average representation of children with additional needs in Educate Together schools is not only due to the newer status of these schools, but is also to do with our equality-based ethos. As a sector whose vision and aims centre on equality-based provision, Educate Together schools are keenly sought after by many families of children with additional educational needs. Many of our principals tell us that their schools are seen locally as a 'magnet school' for students with additional and complex educational needs.

¹ '15.7% of ETSS students indicated they have a special need or disability and 22% of students indicated that they received extra help with school subjects in the last 12 months. It is likely that these numbers are an underestimation of the level of need at ETSSs, as some school leaders and teachers suggested the level of need at their school is higher than 30% of the student body. By comparison, 13% of 13-year-olds in the child cohort of the GUI indicated they received extra help in some subjects in the last 12 months.' (ESRI 2020, forthcoming)

1. Educate Together and Inclusive Education

Educate Together's Charter requires its schools to deliver education which is:



Our schools therefore strive to be inclusive and equitable, and our national office works to ensure they can do this through providing CPD and other supports, and through identifying barriers to inclusion in the system, and advocating for change where this is required.

Examples of supports that we currently provide are:

- Ethos Self-evaluation Tool
- Ethos Guidance Platform
- Comprehensive Ethical Education curriculum
- Teacher education on equality-based and ethical education (pre-service and CPD)
- Nurture Schools Programme

Research in Ireland and internationally shows clearly that school ethos is vital for the inclusion of children with additional needs. However, school ethos alone cannot ensure that the educational needs of all children are met. In striving to meet the needs of children with additional needs, Educate Together has identified a number of systemic issues which inhibit schools from ensuring that every child reaches their full potential.

2. Resourcing Inclusive Education

There have been many positive developments in the education of children and young people with additional educational needs in recent decades. Increased diagnosis, research and understanding into special education², coupled with the inclusive model of provision, requires the resourcing of inclusive education to be ever-evolving, responsive and flexible. In principle the General Allocation Model (GAM) has many merits as each school receives in advance a single allocation of Special Education Teachers (SETs)

² Educate Together prefers to use the term 'additional' rather than 'special' educational needs. Many Educate Together schools do not use the terms 'special education', 'special class' or 'special needs assistant' in light of the potential stigmatisation of children with additional needs, or otherwise negative impact of the use of these terms

determined by the size and educational profile of the school. The principle behind the model is that schools have the necessary resources in advance so that students with Additional/Special Educational Needs (AENs) can be enrolled, and access supports from the outset of their education. The model set out to do away with the requirement for expensive diagnoses to lever supports and to provide schools with the autonomy to allocate resources to the neediest children as they saw fit.

In practice however the GAM model is not working for many children and young people as the staffing allocation to support their additional and complex needs is inadequate.

Staffing

Figures collated by a campaign³ to highlight reduced provision for children and young people with additional educational needs reveal that since 2011;

- There have been 80,000 applications by schools for access to Additional Needs Assistants⁴ / Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) however the number of new SNA posts was 5,375.
- The GAM model, while well intentioned, frontloads allocation. However, frontloading does not present a possibility for provision to be flexible or responsive where numbers fluctuate. Where a school identifies the need for additional support after it receives its allocation, the school must apply for an exceptional review. However, the grounds for such a review are too narrow, and many schools with significant needs are denied even the possibility of a review.
- A very high number of applications for exceptional reviews are denied on the grounds that their circumstances are not ‘exceptional’. For example, in 2019/20 there were 10,500 applications for an exceptional review, and 4,000 were rejected. The application process is hugely time-consuming and requires considerable documentation adding to the already overburdened administrative demands on principals. In order to be responsive to the real and urgent needs of children, the grounds for exceptional reviews need to be flexible and less restrictive.
- There is a lack of transparency in how staffing allocations are arrived at, which creates additional work for principals who are forced to pursue further supports they believe their students should be entitled to when compared to similarly profiled schools. For example, please see the table below, which presents data gathered from Educate Together’s newest primary schools in July 2020. The data reveal large allocation differences between schools of similar size, type, community and intake. Responses to queries about these differences have been unclear, and this lack of transparency is problematic as it creates uncertainty and mistrust in this model.

School	Year Opened	MCT Staffing	SET Allocation	Projected Enrolment ⁵
<i>Fermoy ETNS</i>	2018	P+1	12.5	22
<i>Harcourt Terrace ETNS</i>	2018	P+2	13	47
<i>Stapolin ETNS</i>	2019	P+2	15	53

³ Kids Behind the Cuts <http://kidsbehindthecuts.org>

⁴ Many Educate Together schools prefer the term Additional Needs Assistants (ANAs), given the potential negative implications of the term ‘special’ in this role title.

⁵ Allocation for new and developing schools is on the basis of projected enrolment.

<i>KRC ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	10	26
<i>Leixlip ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	10	27
<i>Harold's Cross ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	12.5	34
<i>Newtownmountkennedy ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	10	22
<i>Westport ETNS</i>	2019	P	10	14
<i>South Lee ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	12.5	40
<i>Goatstown/Stillorgan ETNS</i>	2019	P+1	12.5	43
<i>Cherrywood ETNS</i>	2020	P+1	20	20
<i>Owenabue ETNS</i>	2020	P+1	22.5	20
<i>Rathcoole ETNS</i>	2020	P+1	12.5	22

- There are parallel issues with regard to the allocation of SNAs and serious concerns about how a general allocation model for SNAs can meet the needs in schools when the *current needs are not being met* and consequently a front-loaded new model would be based on inadequate existing provision.
- Principals require greater transparency in how allocations are made. Transparency in relation to the specific methods and formulae employed by the DES / NCSE to arrive at allocations would serve to increase clarity and understanding of the model and reduce the number of appeals.
- Effective models of integration and inclusion ensure that schools have access to high quality psychological, speech and language and other supports and therapists on site. Educate Together welcomes moves towards this, as demonstrated by the trialing of a School Inclusion Model, and is pleased that some of its schools are engaged in the piloting of this model. However, schools have serious concerns that the levels of these supports current available fall far short of what is required. It is likely that considerable additional investment in these supports will be required, and it is vital that the Pilot is completed and a full report published before it is extended, as plans will need to take account of these needs.
- With responsibilities increasing steadily as new initiatives have been introduced, the workload of school principals and deputy principals has also increased. The impact of this has been highlighted in recent surveys that show worrying levels of stress and burnout among principals, especially teaching principals. Catering for increased numbers of children with additional needs in mainstream schools, both in mainstream classes and classes for children with specific identified needs, such as ASDs, requires considerable additional staffing, including both SETs and SNAs, the purchase of specialist resources and equipment, and ongoing liaison with other services (NEPs, SLTs, etc.). There is considerable administrative and HR work involved in recruiting, supporting and managing these additional staff members, monitoring integration and use of resources and evaluating provision, and the increased impact on principals' workloads needs immediate review. As we move towards greater inclusion and integration of children with additional needs across the system, schools need to be resourced at management level so that school leaders can properly manage and support this transition.

Key recommendations:

- **Publish clear information about how SET and SNA allocations are calculated**
- **Introduce a new review mechanism which is simple and accessible**

- **Complete School Inclusion Model Pilot and plan for additional psychological, speech and language and other resources for schools based on findings**
- **Provide additional management capacity to enable school leaders to manage and support change**

Teacher Capacity (ITE/CPD)

Improvements in teacher education would have a lasting improvement on the provision of inclusive education for children and young people with additional and complex educational needs.

- In a recent submission⁶ to NCSE, Inclusion Ireland report that many teachers feel ‘ill equipped’ and ‘thrown in at the deep end’ by not having the expertise or training to adequately support children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Inclusion Ireland go on to express serious concerns about the extent to which young, newly qualified teachers are being placed in special classes with students who, because of their very complex needs, required the most experienced and trained teachers. The submission cites an Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland study which revealed that only 5% of teachers in specialist classes have a SEN qualification, while just 1 in 5 had participated in SEN training in recent years.
- The DES-funded post-graduate diploma in SEN which is currently provided in different third-level institutions is excellent, in its content and outcomes and in terms of its funding, which makes it accessible to teachers in all parts of the country. However, the number of places available falls far short of the system’s needs. Requiring teachers to already be in special education posts means that the system is set up to have inexperienced teachers catering for the needs of children and young people with additional and complex needs. This, along with current rules which limit participation to one teacher per school, communicates the message that only teachers in dedicated special education roles require expertise in this area, which is contrary to the principles of inclusive and integrated education reflected in current policy changes. A strong measure of support for inclusive education would be the widening of access to this course, and the provision of enhanced ITE and CPD to support teachers in responding effectively to students with emotional, behavioural and additional educational needs.

Key Recommendations:

- **Increase the number of available places on the post-graduate diploma in SEN**
- **Widen access to funded CPD for teachers not currently in SEN roles**

Parity across the system

Educate Together welcomes current reforms that are aimed at ensuring that all schools can meet the needs of all children. In order for the system to be equitable, children with additional needs should be able to attend schools in their local area, along with their siblings, and supported to reach their full potential. Historically, however, provision for children with additional needs has been focused in a small

⁶ Inclusion Ireland. *Submission to the NCSE on inclusive education* (June 2020).
<http://www.inclusionireland.ie/sites/default/files/attach/basic-page/1651/ncse-submission-final.pdf>

number of schools in Ireland. A roadmap is therefore required to manage a change in provision to re-balance the system.

Educate Together welcomes changes in admissions legislation which require all schools to enrol children without regard to their needs or abilities. However, concerns remain around 'soft barriers' to enrolment, which may include underdeveloped SEN provision in some schools compared to others. The General Allocation Model envisages a system where children with additional needs are spread evenly throughout the system. While this may be the aim of current reforms, the reality right now is very different. Allocating resources equally among schools right now, therefore, effectively disadvantages children in schools with high proportions of students with additional needs. Greater flexibility to respond to the changing needs of schools in interim is vital, so that resources can be allocated where they are needed. A roadmap is required which supports and incentivises established schools with limited numbers of children with additional needs to develop capacity in this area, and to actively recruit these students. Increasing awareness among parents of their children's rights and of schools' responsibilities under the new Admissions Act would also be an important element of such a roadmap.

Key recommendations:

- **Develop a roadmap to system-wide inclusion which supports all schools to become inclusive schools over time.**
- **Refine the General Allocation Model to enable the system to respond to children's needs where they are, and as they move.**

3. Issues for developing schools

The issues set out above apply to all Educate Together schools, and indeed all schools with high numbers of children with additional needs. An additional set of issues are experienced by schools in our network that have 'new/developing status'. As previously indicated a very high proportion of the Educate Together schools fall into these categories, however it is important to state that these are issues that **all 'new/developing' schools** experience, because of this status, rather than Educate Together schools specifically.

When the new GAM was introduced in 2017/18 allocation shifted from the diagnosed needs of children already enrolled to an allocation based on a school's profile which would take into account such things as: the numbers of children with recognised complex needs attending (as per the POD/PPOD); social disadvantage, gender, etc. The model assumes that a school's profile changes only incrementally over time, and that a similar number of students enter the school each year as those leaving. Reviews are carried out biennially.

The experience of new/developing schools to date points towards a systemic problem with the GAM allocations system when assigning resources to new/developing schools for the simple reason that these schools have not reached capacity, their numbers increase rapidly and they have high numbers of students transferring from other schools. Here is a summary of the main problems being encountered:

- As outlined above, Educate Together schools attract a greater proportion of students with additional and complex educational needs than the national average. Often these students will

have started out in another school and will **transfer** to an Educate Together school – in such cases the allocation for those students stays with their original school. The system does not provide for a transfer of resources to follow the student and consequently the receiving school must address their needs based on an allocation that was made which didn't take account of those needs.

- Similarly, the algorithm employed by the NCSE / DES is not only blind towards student transfers between schools but is also incapable of responding to **late diagnosis** of need once the school allocation has been made. A **bridging mechanism** that we understand has been put in place for new/developing schools is not adequate to address the high level of need – the small increases that have been allowed fall far short of meeting the needs of the children enrolled.
- As outlined earlier, a school's only recourse is to seek an exceptional review, but only in certain circumstances; the categories of 'exceptional' are pre-ordained and inflexible to the real needs on the ground in schools. Many of our schools have been refused access to an exceptional review on the grounds that their situation is not exceptional, even where they have enrolled up to 100 additional children, sometimes including high numbers of children with Autism.

Example: One developing school spent 120 hours applying for an exceptional review. When the review was completed, towards the end of the school year, the school was allocated two additional teachers, such was their need. However, because the same algorithm was applied the following year, the allocation provided by the review was erased in the next allocation round, despite significant additional enrolments, forcing the school to start the review application process again.

Overall, the effects on the GAM on new and developing schools can be summarised as follows:

- The well-being of all children is negatively impacted due to lack of access to support teaching. Early intervention programmes are impossible to implement due to staffing restrictions, and resources are too often allocated where needs are urgent and where behaviour has become challenging.
- The educational outcomes of children with additional needs are negatively impacted due to lack of access to support teaching. There is a limited ability to work with pupils individually, which limits a child's IEP targets and impacts on their progress and development.
- The well-being of staff is negatively impacted as there are increased stress levels within support teams due to the size of each teacher's caseload. It is impossible for schools to adopt best practice due to understaffing. The net result is that students with the most need are being further disadvantaged and they are being prevented from experiencing a healthy and successful education and reaching their full potential.

Educate Together is advocating for the DES and the NCSE to devise a separate or amended allocations model for new/developing schools that recognises their rapid growth and the profile of their pupils. This new system must be used to allocate additional hours to schools on an annual basis until they are no longer developing (i.e. reach their full capacity – to Sixth Class/ 6th Year - and complete development in terms of streams / class groups throughout the school).

Key recommendations:

- **Develop a refined allocation model for developing schools with in-built annual review, which takes account of these schools' particular needs and their rapidly-changing contexts.**

4. What can Educate Together offer?

Educate Together as a sector is well placed to offer support to the DES in this area due to several interrelated factors.

- Our ethos is centrally focused on inclusive equality-based education for all
- Staff in Educate Together are highly motivated to deliver inclusive education
- Educate Together schools have higher than average numbers of children and young people with additional and complex educational needs
- Educate Together schools tend to be early adopters and involved in new and pilot programmes.
- The Educate Together sector is relatively small but diverse ranging from well-established schools to newly established schools and different school types, with a national spread. In effect the sector represents a microcosm of the wider primary and post-primary school system.

The recently published UNESCO⁷ report on Inclusion and Education *All Means All* recommends a sharing of expertise and resources. Educate Together recognises the scarcity of resources in the system, which is compounded by the current health crisis, and is very willing to share our expertise in the area of inclusive education for the benefit of all. As a relatively small sector we are very well placed to provide support in engaging in meaningful consultation with families and parents so that future developments are informed by the experience on the ground.

Further information:

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⁷ Global Education Monitoring Report 2020, Inclusion and Education: all means all.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721.locale=en>