

NCSE Statement of Strategy 2022 – 2026 Submission from Educate Together

Background on Educate Together

Educate Together is the representative body for 117 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.

As the management body for the fastest growing sector of primary schools, Educate Together is committed to working closely with the Department of Education (DE), NCSE 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 33,000 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. **43%** of Educate Together national schools have special classes; a much **higher proportion than other sectors** 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)

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

A. Planning

Take a more **pro-active approach to planning** at system level.

Our experience as patron of a large proportion of new and developing schools is that the current approach to providing special classes relies heavily on the school building programme; schools that are new or growing are more likely to be asked to open classes for children with Autism, for example, which leads to skewed provision, both geographically and in terms of school type.

Stats from recent DE and NCSE figures:

There are a total of 97 special classes in the Educate Together **primary network** in the 2020/21 school year. This includes 90 ASD classes, 7 ASD early intervention and 1 speech and language disorder class. This represents:

- **7.5% of all of the special classes** in the country
- **9% of all of the primary ASD classes** in the country
- **5% of the early intervention ASD classes**

When we just have **3% of the schools**. (5% of the pupils)

At **post-primary level** Educate Together already have 11 special classes, all of which are ASD classes. This represents

- **2.5% of all of the ASD classes at post-primary level**

When we have 1.6% of the schools (**1.25% of the students**).

And **70% of these schools are in temporary accommodation**.

While it is important to take advantage of all possible avenues, the expansion of special education provision – both in dedicated classes or schools and in mainstream - should be pro-actively planned so that all schools are fully equipped and resourced to cater for the children in their area.

Specific Actions

- **Conduct research into the spread of students with additional needs across schools in different socio-economic areas and different school types and use the findings to inform planning.**
- **Develop a roadmap for change – a clear path to address current imbalances and work towards a future where all schools cater for the children in their local area.**
- **Make parents aware of schools' obligations under the new Admissions Act – all schools should strive to meet the needs of all students.**
- **Continue to work collaboratively with forward planning and other sections of the DE on new special class provision, but without relying on new and developing schools to provide all additional provision.**

B. 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 education, coupled with the inclusive model of provision, requires the resourcing of inclusive education to be ever-evolving, responsive and flexible.

In principle, the ‘frontloaded’ allocation model that was introduced in 2017 has many merits as each school receives in advance a single allocation of Special Education Teachers (SETs) determined by the size and educational profile of the school. The principle behind the model is a good one: 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.

In practice however the ‘frontloaded model’ is not working for many children and young people, as the staffing allocation to support their additional and complex needs is inadequate. It is acknowledged that considerable investment has been made in the system in recent years, and yet many students cannot access the supports they need because the resources (staffing, therapeutic supports, etc) are not available in the school they attend. A review is now due of the impact of the move to the frontloaded allocation model on schools across the system, so that anomalies can be identified and adjustments made to the model based on real identified needs on the ground.

The development of a model that incorporates school-based therapeutic services is to be welcomed – these supports are certainly necessary if children with complex needs are to be properly supported in schools. It is now necessary to complete the pilot that is underway and to provide a full evaluation of the approach taken, so that learning can be captured and further developments planned based on the findings. This review must pay close attention to the workload of school leaders in managing the high numbers of school-based and shared staff; teachers, SNAs and therapist, and must be completed before any further expansion of the model.

Specific Actions:

- **Complete School Inclusion Model Pilot**
- **Report on school leader workloads involved in implementing the School Inclusion Model**
- **Report on impact of School Inclusion Model on student learning outcomes**
- **Plan for additional psychological, speech and language and other resources and management supports for schools based on findings**

Staffing

There is currently a lack of transparency in how staffing allocations are arrived at. There is a lack of clarity in relation to the total number of SETs allocated, and in relation to schools’ entitlement or otherwise to dedicated EAL teachers. While a ‘frontloaded’ model may make sense for most established schools once the numbers of children with additional needs are evenly spread across schools in different geographical areas and schools of different types, that is not the case at present. This 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 with different allocations.

- ‘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.

A large proportion of EAL students attend Educate Together schools, with some developing schools reporting **EAL of up to 80%**. Yet every year, many of these schools are not allocated EAL posts and have to appeal each year, which is granted temporarily. However, the process of appealing has to start over again the following year when they are still not allocated permanent EAL positions.

"Every year, we have to appeal for our EAL post. As an ET school, we naturally have a lot of pupils with EAL needs. It is frustrating that this is not a permanent post, particularly in a diverse and multi-lingual ET school"

Best practice in EAL is that specialist provision is planned for a three to five year period so that students can develop academic proficiency as well as basic language skills. The lack of clarity in relation to staffing impedes this. Furthermore, and the lack of visibility of EAL provision that has resulted from merging this with Special Education teaching is problematic and may be leading to a loss of dedicated skills in this area. This requires investigation.

Specific Actions

- **Publish clear information about how SET, EAL and SNA allocations are calculated**
- **Review impact of the introduction of the 'frontloaded model' for SET allocations** - may work for established schools once the system is re-balanced but the needs are uneven in the system right now.
- **Conduct research into EAL student experiences and outcomes**
- **Introduce a new review mechanism which is simple and accessible** - Overhaul the exceptional review process to increase access to reviews and reduce time and paperwork required.

Teacher Capacity

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 submission 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 post-graduate course that is available for SETs does not currently include pedagogical content on EAL teaching and there are currently very limited avenues for teachers to develop capacity in this area. Research has suggested that many teachers involved in EAL provision lack confidence and qualifications in this area. Updated research is now required to ascertain levels of capacity in this area.

Specific Actions

- **Support increasing the number of available places on the post-graduate diploma in SEN**
- **Support all teachers and school leaders to upskill by widening access to funded CPD for teachers not currently in SEN roles** - restricting current funded CPD (the post-grad) to those already working as SETs goes against principle of inclusion.
- **Conduct an analysis of teachers' needs in relation to English as an Additional Language (EAL) pedagogy.**

Developing Schools

An additional set of staffing issues are experienced by schools that have 'new/developing status'. This includes a very high proportion of Educate Together schools (59% of all schools opened since 2012 are Educate Together schools), but these are issues that **all 'new/developing' schools** experience, because of this status.

The 'frontloaded' 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.

In addition the system does not provide for a transfer of resources to follow a student who switches from one school to another, and consequently the receiving school must address their needs based on an allocation that was made which didn't take account of those needs.

The experience of new/developing schools to date points towards a systemic problem with the current 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.

The current bridging mechanism of additionality provided for developing schools based on retained developing posts, is insufficient to meet the high level of needs, and not in place when required from September.

In addition, the current process of reprofiling every 2 years is inadequate for new and developing schools which are growing rapidly. This is exacerbated further this year, because of the delay in reprofiling due to Covid-19.

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. In addition, the length of time involved in preparing for an exceptional review, having the review, and waiting for the outcome means that even where additional resources are provided, this happens long after they are needed, meaning the students have lost out in the meantime.

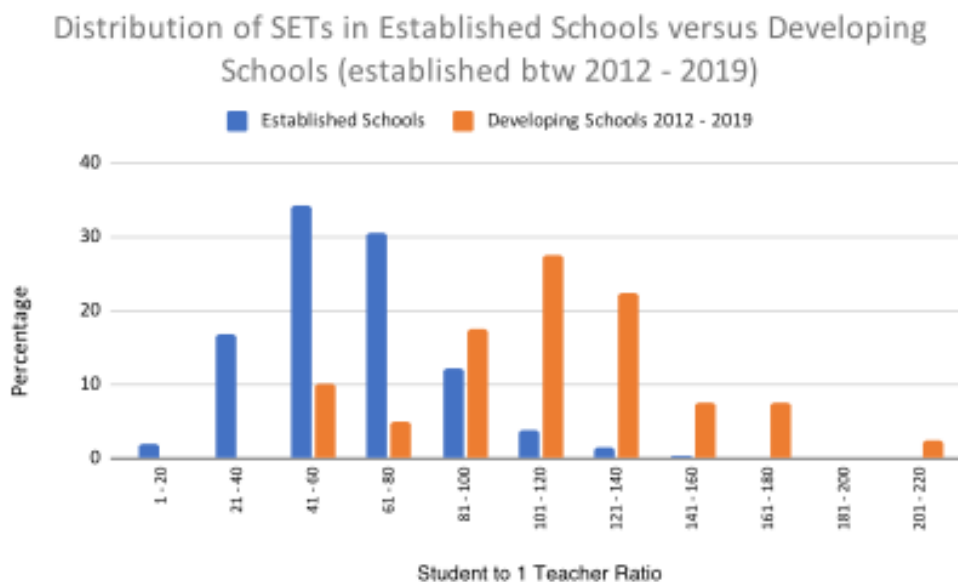
Example: One developing school spent 120 hours applying for an exceptional review. When the review was completed, towards the end of the school year, the school was allocated two additional teachers, such was their need. However, because the same algorithm was applied the following year, the allocation 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.

Recent data compiled by a developing schools working group, and presented to the Department of Education, demonstrates that pupil: SET ratio is significantly lower for new and developing schools.

It is recognised that the ratio of pupil numbers to SETs does not give the full picture. Different schools have different profiles in terms of demographics, levels of need, etc. However, it is our experience that many developing schools attract higher than average numbers of children with additional needs, and are catering for more, rather than lower levels of need, which compounds this under-resourcing further.

Average pupil to SET ratio nationally: 58 : 1

Average pupil to SET ratio in schools opened between 2012 and 2019 110 : 1



“We received the allocation of 15 hours starting in September 2017. There were 47 children in the school then. In September 2021 there will be at least 103. With the same SET hours. There are myriad and complex needs in the school, as there are in all schools, and we will not be able to support them adequately with our current SET allocation. We are already overburdened. There are children not getting the support they do need it because there is no time for it. Teachers are trying to support them in class but this is impacting hugely on teaching and learning. My teachers are under huge pressure, as I am myself in my class, and all I can do is juggle a timetable that is already well past breaking point”.

Specific Actions

- **Conduct research which specifically explores the levels of additional need among students in new and developing schools and the staffing and management capacity in these schools.**
- **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.**