



BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY
COMHLAHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH NA BREATAINE
AGUS NA hÉIREANN

31st PLENARY SESSION
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
Report agreed at 30th plenary session

**OBSERVATIONS BY THE IRISH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND
SCIENCE**

The Irish Department of Education and Science welcomes the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body's Report from Committee D (Environment and Social) on its enquiry into special needs educational provision in Britain and Ireland, with special reference to autism and notes its recommendations

The Department believes that the enactment of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act) and the establishment of the National Council for Special Education, which has been operational since the 1st January 2005, provides a legislative and structural framework which will benefit all children with disabilities, including those with autism

The EPSEN Act provides a comprehensive legislative framework to govern the delivery of services for while the establishment of the National Council for Special Education will improve and speed up the delivery of services to pupils with special needs, their parents and schools. The Act sets out a range of services, which must be provided, including assessments, education plans and support services. Every child with special educational needs is entitled to an individual education plan (IEP), prepared by appropriate professionals. The IEP will set out the child's educational needs, the special education and related support services to be provided to him or her and the goals, which the child is to achieve over a period of not more than 12 months. Parents have a right to participate and provide inputs in the preparation of the IEP and the IEP is subject to regular review and amendment.

While the sections of the EPSEN Act relating to IEPs have not yet commenced, the Department is aware that some schools have already initiated processes whereby individual plans have been drawn up in respect of pupils with special educational needs. This process generally involves school staff, the pupil's parents, the school psychologist and any other professionals involved with the pupil. Part of the requirement of such plans is that they are reviewed regularly with all those involved in drawing them up.

The provision of education services for pupils of post primary age with autism is dependent on the professionally assessed needs of the individual pupil. The Department's policy is to ensure the maximum possible integration of pupils with special educational needs into ordinary mainstream schools. Where mainstream provision is not appropriate pupils can be catered for in special schools which are dedicated to particular disability groups. There are now 107 special schools in the country. These schools cater for children from 4 to 18 years of age and each school enjoys a significantly reduced pupil teacher ratio and other staffing supports.

The Department of Education and Science issued a comprehensive circular to all primary schools in August 2005 regarding the organisation of teaching resources for pupils who need additional support in mainstream primary schools. The main purpose of this circular is to provide guidance for schools on the deployment and organisation of the teaching resources that were allocated under the general allocation model. Reference is also made in this circular to the deployment of additional teaching resources that are allocated

to schools for the support of individual pupils with low incidence disabilities, including those with autism

The Department has developed a strategy designed to meet the continuing professional development needs of all school personnel working with children with special educational needs and supports for persons with autistic spectrum disorders

Specifically, the strategy has produced

- a major expansion of the range of post-graduate professional training programmes
- the introduction of a range of new training programmes to provide a mix of intensive induction training and more advanced training in specific areas
- the establishment of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in September 2003

For teachers involved in teaching children with special educational needs, the Department currently provides support on an annual basis for

- 140 places on a post-graduate diploma programme in special educational needs
- 20 places on a post-graduate programme in Autism
- 16 places on a further education / masters programme in special educational needs

The Department also funded the development of an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) training programme in Trinity College Dublin and funded the participation 12 teachers on the course in 2003-2004. The successful participants are now available to the Department, as classroom teachers and as a further training resource

As part of its response to the growing demand from teachers for support and training, the SESS has developed teams of trainers to deliver training in four specific areas, including autism. This training is delivered locally across the State through the Education Centre network. In addition, the Service provides immediate responses to requests from schools for support in a variety of autism-related areas. Currently the SESS are providing 'An Introduction to Autism' one day seminar for classroom teachers who currently have a child with autism in their classroom. The Service also funds the provision of on-line training courses for teachers, including a course on autism, during the summer months of July and August and during the autumn and spring terms. An online course in autism commenced on the 17th October, 2005 and runs until the 2nd of December, 2005. The Service funds approved approaches to the teaching of children with autism such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) and TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children) and the Hanen approach

An initiative to tackle shortages of physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists resulted in an additional 75 Speech and Language Therapy places being provided at Irish Universities. Intake to these courses commenced in the 2003/04 academic year.

In conclusion, this Department is continuing to prioritise the development of the network of special educational provision for children with special needs, including those with autism, and the steps taken in recent years and those currently in hand represent significant progress in the development of those services. Many of the developments are in line with the recommendations and best practices identified in the Report. It is intended that this Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health and Children in developing services for children with autism.

Some comments on specific issues

Paragraphs 24 & 25 – The National Council for Special Education may wish to comment separately on these paragraphs.

Paragraph 28 – Allocation policy for post-primary level continues to be on the basis of assessed needs.

Paragraph 29 – It is more correct to say that children with SEN can attend special classes, dedicated to their particular disability group, attached to certain mainstream schools rather than '[C]hildren with special needs in mainstream schools can attend special classes dedicated to their particular disability group'.

Paragraph 40 – The Report says that in Ireland children with moderate learning difficulties are often attending schools for children with minor learning difficulties, which has resulted in the closure of schools for children with moderate problems. No school for pupils with minor learning difficulties has been closed in Ireland in recent years.