DISABILITY FEDERATION OF IRELAND

Submission on
Department of Education Draft Action Plan to
Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

February 2011
Introduction
The Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI) is the national support organisation for voluntary disability organisations in Ireland who provide services to people with disabilities and disabling conditions. DFI represents the disability interest in the Community and Voluntary Pillar and is a member of the Disability Stakeholders Group which works with Government to progress the National Disability Strategy. DFI works to ensure that Irish society is fully inclusive of people with disabilities so that they can exercise their civil, social and human rights.

DFI welcomes the Department’s intention to adopt a national plan to improve the literacy and numeracy amongst young people. Our main concern with the draft plan is that it fails to adopt the agreed public policy of ensuring that initiatives are inclusive of those with a disability. Children with disabilities are part of the mainstream educational system, and their access to literacy and numeracy needs to be factored into the plan. The document refers to disadvantage with respect to neighbourhood and migrant status but inexplicably neglects to consider disability. It is not acceptable that disability issues be relegated to a ‘special needs’ agenda.

Voluntary organisations representing the diverse disabilities and disabling conditions, including mental health conditions, will be advising on the specific challenges involved in enabling literacy and numeracy for the cohort that they work with. In this submission DFI will consider the over-arching issues that arise if children with disabilities are to benefit from implementation of the plan.

Information
The document rightly emphasises the importance of information to set targets and monitor progress under the plan. Yet information about the educational progress of children with disabilities continues to be inadequate, with the Department instead highlighting its spending on special needs. Is the Department going to develop Individual Educational Plans for all children with disabilities, or what other monitoring is planned to ensure that such children are achieving? At present we do not even know how many IEPs are in operation, much less to what extent the learning goals are being attained.

The plan needs to identify the challenges faced by disabled children in achieving literacy and numeracy and set out how their progress will be targeted and monitored.

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1 Towards 2016, Section 29, page 40.
Transitions

It is well known that children with disabilities face particular difficulties in moving across educational stages. The document refers to transition issues and this could be strengthened by incorporating the disability experience. In particular closer working between the educational and health and voluntary bodies involved in early intervention would help to streamline services for children. Active involvement in initiatives such as the HSE’s committee on integrating services for 0-18 year olds is one obvious place for the Department to engage.

The document refers to Siolta and Aistear, noting that they are inclusive frameworks, meriting priority implementation under the plan. These offer tangible possibilities for including children with disabilities in mainstream education. We recommend the extension of Aistear’s teamed format into early school years to underpin children’s attainment of concepts. The frameworks allow the innovation and creativity that is so effective for learning. Good case examples could be collected for use with younger children.

Supporting Achievement

Training of teaching and related staff in schools is covered in the report with a proposal to increase attention on teaching capacity in reading and numeracy. DFI has been advocating compulsory modules on inclusive development for training existing staff as well as those in college. In our view this expertise and understanding would benefit all children at risk of missing out on key skills.

Another source of support that merits more attention than is given in the draft is on supporting the role of parents and voluntary organisations working with children, whether they are disadvantaged due to disability or other cause. These ‘natural supports’ can be a continuing and coherent ally for the children but the educational authorities need to involve them as partners.

Conclusion

DFI asks DES to strengthen its plan by explicitly including children with disabilities and considering how its proposals regarding targets, monitoring, teaching frameworks, training and partnering with others will take them into account. Disabled children have too often been short-changed, missing out on learning opportunities because the expectations of the system were low and because the system made little effort to tailor its offering to their needs. The national plan can help to overcome this unhappy heritage.
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DFI works to ensure that Irish society is fully inclusive of people with disabilities and disabling conditions, Hidden, intellectual, neurological, mental health, physical, and sensory, so that they can exercise fully their civil, social and human rights. In pursuit of this vision, DFI

- Acts as an advocate for the voluntary disability sector
- Supports organisations to further enable people with disabilities.

There are over 126 organisations within membership or as associates of DFI. DFI also works with a growing number of organisations and groups around the country that have a significant disability interest, mainly from the statutory and voluntary sectors. DFI provides:

- Information
- Training and Support
- Networking
- Advocacy and Representation
- Research and Policy Development
- Organisation and Management Development

DFI also supports the broader voluntary and disability sector through its representation of the disability strand on the Community and Voluntary Pillar of the Social Partnership process and other fora at regional, national and European levels including the Health Service Executive

For further information go to [www.disability-federation.ie](http://www.disability-federation.ie)

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