

## **Feedback from ILSA (Irish Learning Support Association) on consultation on the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-2018**

### **Prioritising Early Years**

Would welcome a focus on early years, with the implementation of *Aistear* to standardise provision in the early years, especially in pre-school facilities. This could give greater focus on the development of social/life/functional communication skills through cooperative play. A new model of in-school speech and language therapy and greater collaboration between parents, schools, and primary care services is also welcome. Another consideration could be to extend this model to include occupational therapists, psychologist and behaviour therapists.

Greater detail is needed on the proposed additional NEPS support for example, will there be a return to NEPS having a greater role in the assessment process for SEN?

The additional teachers and a decrease in class sizes particularly in Junior and Senior Infants would be a substantial improvement. However, would welcome more detail on how additional teacher time for Junior and Senior Infants will be achieved in schools where multi-class situation occurs. It is difficult for a teacher to give the time needed for Junior and Senior Infants if they also have First, Second and maybe Third in the same classroom. The provision of a teaching assistant in all Junior and Senior Infants might also be considered. This is particularly difficult in one-teacher schools where teachers have to teach across the full range of primary classes.

Consideration could be given to the provision of a NEPS type service/or enhanced partnership with HSE to provide a standardised diagnostic process for early identification of SEN and early intervention programmes.

The language curriculum, especially in the early years – up to and including Junior and Senior Infants – might consider focusing on oral language development (vocabulary) and functional communication.

Would like to receive further information on early year's inspections and what information would be published in inspector's reports. Education in the early years could have a broader focus to enable the holistic development of the child.

### **Tackling Disadvantage**

As an organisation providing support to teachers working in the area of SEN ILSA is ideally placed to participate in the collaborative process for the New Action Plan for Educational Inclusion.

In relation to early leavers and second chance learners analysis of current for research could identify contributing factors and how some of the issues might be addressed in Early Years Programmes. Making education relevant to students' lives, particularly for students with SEN could increase retention rates among this group of students.

Reinstating teachers for Travelers and enhanced programme of CPD for these teachers could have a positive impact on continued engagement in education within the Traveller community.

### **Diversity and Choice for Parents**

Would agree with the need to strengthen parental choice and diversity within the school system.

On the issue of small schools it would appear that the issue of one-teacher school, often in remote areas pose a health and safety risk for the teacher and pupils.

In rural areas, where special transport is provided, a number of students with SEN are traveling for perhaps up to two hours, morning and evening. This has a negative impact on their ability to concentrate and therefore learn in school.

In relation to standardizing testing: it must be taken into account that standardized tests may not give a true indication of the ability of some students with SEN, for example, students with ASD. The greater diversity in schools demographic should be reflected in the standardised assessment process and reporting of results.

### **Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools**

Consideration might be given to introduction of specialised teachers in primary schools for some subjects, for example, Science, PE, Music. This could underpin increased engagement with these subjects at Post Primary and Third Level.

Consideration could be given to the re-introduce incentives for teachers to engage in Post Graduate studies, such as the re-instatement of qualification allowances, substitution cover to attend College, Conferences, study days would have a positive impact on the promotion of excellence in schools.

Review provision of CPD for class teachers and principals in the area of SEN to assist inclusion.

Would need further explanation of Local Education Clusters and who will lead clusters etc

### **Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students**

Accept that there should be a focus in literacy and numeracy but the introduction of social/life/functional communication/work skills at primary school level could lay the foundation for greater mental health and wellbeing awareness at post primary level. This could also enhance the learning opportunities for pupils with SEN. Transition programmes, for students with SEN and other vulnerable groups, from pre-school to primary to post primary to 3<sup>rd</sup> level/apprenticeships/work. This may also impact positively on school retention programmes.

### **Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities**

Would welcome the elimination of prefabs. Would suggest greater emphasis on school building design to ensure the provision of natural meeting places and 'critical pathways' that promotes incidental interactions between colleagues and students.

Would welcome the provision of breakfast clubs as some students are unable to concentrate in class due to lack of a nourishing breakfast.

### **Special Needs Education**

Would welcome a review of focus of July provision programme. For example programmes for students with EBD/ASD/ADHD may need to focus on social/life/functional communication skills

rather than academic skills whilst acknowledging that some time should be spent on maintaining academic skills.

A new model of in-school SLT will have a positive impact on students with SEN and the extension of this model to include OT, clinical psychologists and behaviour therapists would further develop support for students with SEN.

An increased number of school inspectors with expertise in low incidence SEN to support and advise teachers on best practice could enrich the inclusion experience for students and teachers.

Would welcome increased CPD in the area of SEN, particularly low incidence SEN, for mainstream class teachers and principals. Part of the principal's role is to direct and monitor the inclusion process and therefore require CPD in the area of SEN in addition to management and leadership. Consideration could be given to providing CPD to assist teachers and support staff to work more effectively together to provide effective access to the national curriculum for students with SEN.

### **Meeting the Skills Needs for the Future**

Would welcome change in the structure of DES to ensure it operates as a dynamic policy leader focused on quality education and improving outcomes for every student. Also understand the significant benefit resulting in policies and initiatives being generated in consultation and partnership with school rather than being imposed in order to gain increased engagement and ultimate success.