

Report of Special Education Needs Sub-Committee 2020/2021

Members: **Paul Fiorentini, President, Brenda Kelly, Chairperson, Mary Jackson, Antoinette Nic Gearailt, Adrian Jackson, Craig Petrie, Patsy McVicar, Dorothy Butterly, Gary O’Sullivan, Cora Tighe, Áine O’Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary ACCS and John Irwin, General Secretary ACCS.**

The focus of the work for the year included the development of an SEN Forum for the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators in Community and Comprehensive Schools and ongoing support for SEN planning at school level in line with the *Guidelines for Post Primary Schools Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream School*.

However, providing support for schools managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SEN provision quickly became the priority last March. During the initial lockdown of schools, information was gathered from individual schools on how they were providing for SEN students in a remote teaching and learning environment. Schools had put in place a wide range of initiatives, programmes and systems to meet their particular needs and circumstances. These exemplars were shared with all of our schools to support them in their provision for students with SEN. The exemplars of best practice were also shared with the DES and contributed to the guidance documents made available to support schools.

After the initial lockdown, the Sub-Committee established the SEN Forum on the Microsoft Teams platform to further support schools’ special education provision. It is accessible to all Community and Comprehensive schools. The aim of the SEN Forum is to create a community of practice for SENCOs and schools and to provide a platform to share best practice, resources and developments in special education provision.

In addition to the SEN Forum, the Sub-Committee held a number of Webinars for SENCOs and school management. Assistive Technology and Wellbeing were identified as particular issues for schools trying to support their SEN students during lockdown and on their return to school. The first Webinar, *Leading SEN in Covid Times*, was held in October, 2020 and focussed on these two issues. Deirdre Madden, Assistive Technology Outreach Co-ordinator, UCC, gave a presentation on the most up to date, mostly free, technologies available to support students with additional needs. Dorothy Butterly, SENCO, Ashbourne Community School, gave a presentation on student wellbeing, raising awareness of the difficulties students experienced as a result of school closure and suggesting strategies that might help schools in providing for students’ wellbeing on their return to school. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, SEN Sub-Committee member and ACCS Executive member, presented a list of SEN resources and supports that the Sub-Committee had researched and compiled to guide schools. This includes guidance to parents, students and teachers by a range of agencies including the DES, NCSE, PDST, NEPS and JCT. All three presentations were very informative and well received by the participants of the Webinar.

A second SEN Webinar was held in January, 2021. Following on from October’s Webinar, Deirdre Madden continued her very informative presentation on Assistive Technologies, concentrating on students with physical and sensory difficulties. There was also an opportunity for participants to meet online and to share good practice and useful resources. This second Webinar was equally well received by the participants. A third SEN Webinar is planned for March, 2021. The guest speaker will be Dr. Johanna Fitzgerald, Head of the Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick. The recorded Webinars and list of resources and supports can be accessed in the files section of the SEN Forum and on www.accs.ie.

The Sub-Committee was involved in ACCS’s input to the consultation process on the new SNA allocation model. The introduction of this new model was deferred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ACCS welcomes the introduction by the DES of the National Training Programme for SNAs. ACCS continues to be represented on the Management Representative Group (MRG), which liaises with the NCSE in relation to Special Education. ACCS also continues to seek the allocation of a stand-alone SENCO position in every school.

Special class provision continues to grow within the Community and Comprehensive sector. In September, 2020, a number of schools opened new special classes for students with ASD. Other schools will open special classes in September, 2021 and 2022. The Sub-Committee aims to provide supports for schools with special classes over the coming year.

The Sub-Committee would like to acknowledge and commend the tremendous work of SENCOs, SETs, SNAs, SMTs and Boards of Management in supporting SEN students' education and wellbeing during very challenging times. The Sub-Committee also wishes to thank John Irwin, General Secretary, and the ACCS Team for their ongoing and invaluable support.

**Brenda Kelly,
Chairperson.**