

Report of ACCS Special Education Needs Sub-Committee 2017/2018

Members: Ms. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, President, Mr. Derek Lowry, Chairperson, Mr. Paul Fiorentini, Ms. Mary Jackson, Mr. Pat McKenna, Ms. Sarah Jane Willis, Donahies C.S., Mr. Jim Ryan, Coolmine C.S., Ms. Mary Douglas, St. Wolstan's C.S, Ms. Áine O'Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary, ACCS and Mr. John Irwin, General Secretary, ACCS.

Since last year's conference the major development in Special Needs Education has been the implementation of the new allocation model. This has moved the allocation of resources away from a dependence on psychological reports to a more multifaceted assessment of the needs of students and schools. Over time this should allow schools to use a more targeted approach to the delivery of support to students with special needs. The funding allocated to SEN for 2017-18 was determined in such a way as to ensure that all schools received at least their allocation of the previous year and extra support where the implementation of the new criteria justified an increased allocation. As the allocation covers two years, schools will now be able to plan the delivery of their SEN programme in a more coherent manner. There should be more certainty for special education/additional staff in terms of their timetables. It will also assist in the preparation and planning for the incoming 1st years who have needs.

After the half term break in November ACCS ran a series of in-service events in three locations on planning for and implementing the new model. A total of 156 participants representing 88 schools attended the three venues which demonstrates the interest of ACCS schools in providing a positive experience for all those with special educational needs.

It should also be acknowledged that the Department of Education and Skills, the Inspectorate, the National Educational Psychological Service and the National Council for Special Education made a significant commitment by agreeing to send representatives to all three venues.

The representatives of the DES, NEPS and the Inspectorate gave an overview of the changes in the new model as they related to each of their areas. The NCSE introduced the National Support Service which will be rolled out over the coming years.

Newpark Comprehensive School gave a presentation on how the school is changing its delivery of Special Educational Needs considering the new model and its experience of the past few years. The feedback on the in-service was very positive overall. Having all three agencies together was particularly useful and it was beneficial to see how one school was managing the change from the old model to the new.

Taking into account the nature of the material to be covered in an afternoon, it was not possible to allow as much time as might have been beneficial for more open discussion of the material presented.

As schools adapt to the new model several outstanding issues remain to be addressed.

Among these are:

- The position of the SENCO within the post structure.
- Training and qualifications for staff working in the area.
- More clarity around the role of NEPS in supporting schools in this area.
- Improving the provision of training for teachers to cater for the level of differentiation within many classrooms.
- Making teaching staff more aware of the Continuum of Support and each teacher's personal responsibility for the SEN student in her/his classroom.
- The implications of the review of the criteria used to assess the complex needs of SEN students.

Overall at the end of this two year period of the new Model it will be important to critically review how schools are using their allocation of resources. This is true especially as the threshold of 20% of resources being shared out among all schools could be problematic in terms of a school's actual requirement based on the number of students they have with needs. The new model should lead to a more equitable allocation of resources across all the schools in the system and this is an issue that ACCS will paying close attention too.

The Department and the NCSE have been involved in a root and branch review of the SNA role and a value for money exercise considering the very substantial numbers of SNAs now in the system. This report should be released in the coming months.

There are several issues in relation to the SNA scheme which hopefully this review will address.

These include:

- As the SNA system has developed in an ad-hoc manner there can be substantial variations in terms of how they are allocated and consistency among Special Educational Needs Organisers would appear still to be an on-going source of frustration for many schools.
- While recent circulars have tried to clarify the role of the SNA, further delineation of the role and the expectations of the post need to be put in place.
- There is very little CPD available on an organised basis for SNAs which does not help generate a consistency of approach across all schools.
- Many training courses have been developed for SNAs but it is difficult to assess their content and value.

Ms. Áine O'Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary and Ms. Antoinette Nic Gearailt, President represent ACCS on the MRG (Management Representative Group). Issues discussed in meetings with the NCSE included timelines for the allocation process, the needs of new and developing schools, profiling of schools, the need for a SENCO position, CPD needs, the roll-out of the NSCE Support Service and Special Classes. The NCSE outlined the development of a pilot project on the provision of therapeutic services for introduction in September 2018.

*Mr. Derek Lowry,
Chairperson.*