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INCLUSION IN OUR SPECIAL CLASSES AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS

A SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION
FROM ASIAM

*AsIAM Policy Office, part of
AsIAM Community Support Department*

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Introduction

AsIAM welcomes the opportunity to engage in ongoing discussions around facilitating authentic inclusion within our education system.

Preceding the publication of the NCSE's *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Special Classes*¹, AsIAM submitted a detailed policy submission² as part of a public consultation process, as well as attending two consultations with the Council. This paper outlined our organisation's views on facilitating greater inclusion within Irish schools, and whether or not we should continue providing special schools and classes for autistic students, or if an accelerated push towards full inclusion into mainstream settings would be in these students' best interests.

Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in March 2018 has introduced a new dynamic to these deliberations; whereby Section 24 of the Convention obligates the State to "*ensure an inclusive education system at all levels*"³ for citizens living with disabilities' development and participation in society. As we strive towards this, it is important that we do not simplify the meaning of this statement. Inclusion is not purely about the setting in which a child attends but whether the child is truly valued, accepted and able to fully participate in their learning environment. AsIAM believes it is vital we work to ensure that every school setting is inclusive of *all* children; we nevertheless believe that special classes and schools currently present a more inclusive and better option for some children, to whom mainstream settings have not been resourced, trained or regulated to support.

From our earlier submission's outset, we were unequivocal in our support for this, affirming that autistic students' rights to partake and be supported within mainstream settings has been enshrined into Irish law since the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.⁴ Indeed, most schoolchildren from our community are educated alongside their neurotypical peers, with as many as one in 65 in mainstream schools are formally diagnosed as on the autism spectrum⁵ (a conservative estimation, in

¹ National Council for Special Education. (October 2019). *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes: An Inclusive Education for An Inclusive Society?: Progress Report*.

² AsIAM. (January 2019). *NCSE Public Consultation Regarding Special Schools & Classes: A Submission from AsIAM*.

³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 24:1(b).

⁴ Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, s(4).

⁵ National Council for Special Education. (July 2016). *NCSE's Policy Advice on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Schools*. Pg.8.

our view, notwithstanding the historically uneven ratio between diagnosed autistic males over females).

Equally, we were no less categorical in our position that special classes and special schools continue to play a critical role in supporting autistic students. There is a crucial need to recognise autism's unique complexity; no single approach will suit each person's needs. As a spectrum condition, individuals will experience their diagnosis differently from person to person, and develop at different paces. We know that the majority of autistic children attend and learn, either with support or independently, in the mainstream class environment. We also know that other students require substantial support, which is only available to them in an autism class or special school such as significant one-to-one time with appropriately trained teachers, access to in-school therapeutic supports, and an appropriately structured environment.⁶ Moreover, significant overlaps exist between autism and co-occurring diagnoses, such as physical or intellectual disabilities, or emotional and behavioural issues, which frequently necessitate the need for specialised therapies and professionals.⁷

In the 19 months since we submitted our initial paper, AsIAM's view remains unchanged: special classes and special schools are, at present, uniquely placed to best meet such complex needs. Whilst it is established policy to facilitate autistic students' participation in mainstream class activities and, indeed, to transition from specialised settings into mainstream (and vice-versa), this is far from a universal reality. The vast majority of students who begin their education in special class settings complete their education there. We must look at *maximising* the participation and integration and meaningful supporting students to transition to mainstream, with all required support, as our starting point to total inclusion.

Nevertheless, we are conscious of existing barriers to autistic young people's education and their participation within their school community. Major gaps continue to persist in terms of equitable enrollment policies, suitable assessments for identifying needs, devising and regularly reviewing education plans, as well as integrating best practices for engaging with autism within school staff's continuing professional development (CPD). Our observations here have been further influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic's effects, which has further highlighted our community's vulnerability to these

⁶ AsIAM. (January 2019). *NCSE Consultations Regarding Special Schools & Classes: A Submission from AsIAM*. Pgs.1-2.

⁷ Ibid

gaps' consequences. Indeed, we believe that one of the key learnings from COVID-19 is the importance of ring-fencing and protecting special education environments and viewing them differently. Whilst other European countries were able to distinguish between special education settings and the general school system in responding to the pandemic⁸, Ireland's special education settings closed and remote learning failed many.

We support any efforts to create a roadmap towards greater inclusion, but this roadmap must allow for parental choice, reflect the autism spectrum's diversity, and be appropriately costed and measurable. This plan's vision must also not only acknowledge and address the systemic gaps within our current continuum of provision; its successful rollout should be predicated upon the understanding that it will be a *long-term* ambition. This requires root and branch reform and regulation of our education system in terms of teacher training, assessment, school policy and culture and, most critically, major investment.

In this paper, AsIAM will set out our position on how best to deliver inclusion for our students with disabilities. We will explore the current framework of Ireland's education system, identifying key issues which need to be addressed, as well as the new challenges presented in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸ Throughout August 2020, AsIAM contacted several of our sister organisations throughout Europe, asking for a briefing of how each jurisdiction managed special educational provisions for autistic students in the context of their respective responses to COVID-19. The vast majority continued to provide support to students on the spectrum to a higher intensity than what has been available to autistic young people in Ireland.

The Role of Special Classes and Special Schools in Ireland

It is vital that any conversation about inclusion does not seek to diminish or devalue one educational offering over another. Inclusion can take place in a variety of ways, as well as in equally diverse settings. For one child, inclusion may involve full-time enrollment in a mainstream class - whereas another may be more meaningfully included and supported whilst attending a special school, which is co-located next to mainstream settings.

Equally, another child may be effectively included in their school community whilst attending an autism class for part of their school day. There are significant positive supports offered by special classes and schools which are not available to students in mainstream.

It is essential that these positives are understood and taken into consideration in any discussion about the future of such educational settings:

- **Much greater access to one-to-one support from teachers and SNAs;**
- **Opportunity to work individually at one's own pace;**
- **Ability to work to a very personalised curriculum and to prioritise social and life skills alongside academics;**
- **Experienced teaching and care staff who are more likely to have accessed specialist training;**
- **Appropriately designed and structured learning environments;**
- **Greater understanding, consideration and prioritisation to support needs in school policies;**
- **Access to specialised learning programmes and opportunities, and;**
- **Links to community and health service providers.**

Creating Inclusive Schools in a New Context

At the crux of this issue, AsIAM believes, lies the underlying issue of how best we can meet our most vulnerable students' needs, whilst fostering practical means of authentic participation for them within their school communities. Whilst the NCSE rightly notes that Ireland has progressed in this regard over recent years⁹, there yet remain numerous, and often insidious barriers to facilitating participation for autistic students.

The Chief Inspector's report identified several of these obstacles in detail¹⁰, across both primary and post-primary settings. Among their key findings, issues of concern which stood out from our analysis included:

- Disproportionate knowledge levels around best practices for engaging with autism between primary and post-primary educators;
- Unsuitable autism assessments used to track needs and identify progress were in place in a significant minority (38%)¹¹ of all primary schools inspected;
- Just half of the enrolment policies examined for entry to the special classes at post-primary level were judged by inspectors to be clear and appropriate¹², and;
- Strikingly irregular levels of how parents are regularly consulted during their child's the individualised learning process, between those at primary and post-primary levels¹³.

Tailoring appropriate educational supports for autistic students means accounting for variables involved with the sheer range of challenges these students will uniquely face throughout their school lives. For some, steady integration into a mainstream class with their neurotypical peers is a feasible goal, and should be actively worked towards. For others, specialised settings currently provide the necessary support to accommodate very complex needs. AsIAM has repeatedly stressed this point's importance, before commencing any serious discussions about meeting autistic schoolchildren's needs within inclusive settings.

⁹ NCSE. *Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society?* Pgs.2-4.

¹⁰ Inspectorate. (May 2020). *Education Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland*. Pgs.6-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 23.

¹² *Ibid.* Pg. 38.

¹³ *Ibid.* Pgs.57-58.

The vast majority of autistic students, and indeed other cohorts of our student population with disabilities¹⁴, are educated within mainstream settings. This does not, however, equate to their needs being met or their being meaningfully included, as the Inspectorate's report bears out. Numerous barriers exist, both explicitly and implicitly, to facilitating meaningful inclusion for autistic students within their school communities. These range from (but are by no means limited to) equitable access to SNA/SET support and use of assistive technology, to outdated or misused disciplinary policies and a lack of professional understanding about autism. The systemic nature of these shortcomings exercise a cumulative impact over an autistic child's school experiences, which becomes swiftly apparent as we discuss them in detail throughout the following subsections. We propose that the achievement of a truly inclusive education system requires a roadmap of fundamental reform of both support for students with additional needs and the education system more generally.

Enrollment Policies

It remains an unjust reality that students with additional needs face undue soft barriers to accessing school placements. This takes place not only for mainstream class places, but also when students with high support needs require special class placements. The relevant section of the School Admission Act must be commended and all soft barriers must be removed to ensure that young people have parity of access to school places.

Pupil : Teacher Ratio

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to meaningful inclusion in the mainstream classroom is the number of pupils to teachers. Irish class sizes, at both primary and post-primary levels, are significantly above EU and OECD averages¹⁵ and nearly 20% of primary school classes are in excess of as many as 30 or more students¹⁶.

This is a barrier to effective differentiation and prevents teachers from having the optimum time needed to support students with the greatest level of need within the classroom. To achieve an inclusive education system an important first step is to reduce pupil teacher ratio.

¹⁴ NCSE. (2016). Pg.3.

¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (September 2019). *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. Pgs.376-777.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Teacher Training and Assessing Students' Needs

Any efforts to advance greater inclusion and participation in mainstream education will require an ambitious reform of how we train our teachers, as well as a revamp of the opportunities provided for continuing professional development (CPD). Such an action has often featured within several NCSE reports' key recommendations list - yet if this is such a well-recognised area for improvement, why then have we seen little action taken to directly address it from policy-makers? As we noted during our initial paper, whilst various pieces of legislation passed in recent years have attempted to format practical supports for autistic pupils' inclusion, comparatively few have addressed the fundamental issue of *how* and to *what extent* their teachers are trained to engage with autism in-class.¹⁷

As autistic students across the country return to school after an abrupt and extended absence, a new way of thinking of how we can deliver best outcomes for their personal and educational wellbeing will be critical. New challenges will involve teaching staff taking on additional responsibilities, particularly in terms of reassessing autistic pupils' needs and education plans, of whom many will have significantly regressed over the past several months. The scale of this undertaking is further complicated as co-occurring physical and mental conditions must also be taken into account, of which over half of autistic people are estimated to live with¹⁸.

Our organisation believes that **a new pathway of teacher education is needed to deliver positive outcomes for autistic students and their teachers in this new context**. To this end, it is our view that best practices for inclusion must assume a significantly greater profile within ITE, with a view to provide educators across all streams with regular opportunities for CPD in how to address obstacles to qualitative learning and participation. A coordinated approach among the Department, the NCSE, and Teaching Council, whilst also involving autistic pupils and their families as full stakeholders, will be key to achieving this goal.

¹⁷ AslAm. (January 2019). *NCSE Public Consultation Regarding Special Schools & Classes: A Submission from AslAm*. Pg.4.

¹⁸ Catalá-López, F., Ridaó, M., Hurtado, I. et al. "Prevalence and comorbidity of autism spectrum disorder in Spain: study protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies." *Systematic Reviews*. 2019; 8(1):141. Pg.2.

Special Needs Assistants and Special Education Teachers

If more students are to attend mainstream class settings, or indeed, are to integrate effectively from autism classes to mainstream, then it is vital that a level of support is guaranteed. Autistic learners can thrive in the mainstream when support is provided, yet it can too often be elusive or require substantial pressure from parents to secure. This in and of itself undermines confidence in the State's commitment to inclusion and influences parental preferences.

The pitfalls of school profiling have been brought into light by this year's Leaving Certificate results process. It is necessary to place a much greater scrutiny on the effectiveness of this approach to ensure that all students receive the support based on need, not a postcode lottery. Furthermore, adequate steps must be taken to guarantee the appropriate management of resources by schools (particularly in the area of SET time).

Curriculum and Assessment

Ireland has been relatively late in developing learning programmes for those with the highest support needs and greatest academic challenges. AsIAM welcomes the development of Level 1 and Level 2 Programmes on the National Qualification Framework; nevertheless, we have significant strides yet to make before universal access to alternative learning programmes is a reality across *all levels* of our education system.

Our post-primary education system is built around two major academic examinations, the Junior and Leaving Certificates. So long this framework is structured in such a way to maximise academic achievement, it will invariably exclude those pupils with different learning abilities and priorities. A significant shift in the content of our curriculum and the assessment of students is a vital ingredient in making Ireland's education system more inclusive.

Physical Environment

Public buildings are required by law to be accessible for those with disabilities¹⁹. It is of great concern to us that the Department of Education has not prioritised the needs of autistic students in the design of its education settings. New school buildings continue

¹⁹ Disability Act 2005, s(25).

to pose challenges around sensory overload owing to their design. Autistic students face accessibility barriers in the built environment and these must be addressed for meaningful inclusion to occur.

Therapeutic supports

The NCSE recommended to the Government, and is presently piloting, an In-School Therapy Service.²⁰ This is a critical tool to ensure autistic students are supported in dealing with the daily challenges of school and have every opportunity to reach their personal potential. It is also an important resource for developing the teachers' skillsets and for schools to support students with additional needs.

It is concerning that there is no proposed timeline for this service's national rollout in the Programme for Government, and that changes to the SNA Scheme, which were meant to be accompanied by this support, have proceeded *ahead* of its delivery. In order to achieve real inclusion this service must be appropriately resourced and rolled-out nationally.

Autism Awareness on Schools' Boards of Management

We have discussed the importance of fostering autism awareness throughout all levels of school communities. This includes their Boards of Management (BOM), who have a specific obligation to ensure that decisions affecting autistic students' education and wellbeing are well-informed by best practices and an ever-expanding understanding of autism. This is particularly pertinent for key Board functions around enrollments, disciplinary procedures, disputes around support plans, and the appropriate management of SEN resources within a school.

One of key findings during our survey amongst families of autistic pupils was that an overwhelming majority (92%²¹) feel that Boards should have at least *one* statutory member with a professional background in special education. Whilst this is informally encouraged in some individual settings, at present there is no explicit directory from the Department which specifically mandates such a practice within BOM.

²⁰ National Council for Special Education. (2018). "NCSE welcomes launch of In-School Therapy Support Project." Press Release. 14th May.

²¹ AslAm. (January 2019). *NCSE Public Consultation Regarding Special Schools & Classes: A Submission from AslAm*. Pg.3.

AsIAM recommends that this be set as a key goal within any proposed roadmap towards full inclusion in mainstream schools. We recognise that several logistical considerations must be taken into account in terms of sourcing and recruiting appropriately qualified personnel, yet we are nonetheless emphatic in our belief that this measure will provide schools with much-needed expertise. Indeed, it will also reassure parents that decisions on their children's education have been well-informed by professional knowledge, going a long way towards defusing potential tensions existing between families and schools.

Moreover, the ongoing pandemic's context has further highlighted the need for having a permanent member with a background in special and inclusive education on BOM. A plethora of re-assessments will be required to gauge how to assist autistic students as they return from five months without their regular in-school supports; this will invariably involve readjustments to existing therapy and timetable regimens. A dedicated member of the BOM with specific expertise in inclusive education could provide reassurance to all parties that these adjustments will be undertaken in accordance with the correct procedures and on an informed basis.

Stakeholder Trust and Confidence

There is currently a relatively low level of trust of the education system by parents of students with additional needs. Access to support and acceptance can too often be a battle. When the system seems inaccessible, there doesn't always seem to be anyone available to help or offer support. The Department of Education has consistently failed to fully implement promised reforms from implementation of the EPSEN Act to changes to the SNA Scheme. If a roadmap for inclusion is to have the desired effect of maximising participation and true inclusion, it must win the trust of families and not be seen as a rushed effort to disadvantage families and remove specialised support.

Any roadmap must be costed, have key performance indicators and involve the disability community in its oversight and implementation. We cannot move forward on a roadmap for inclusion, and certainly cannot move away from special class or school provision, unless true progress is made on each step along the way. In addition, adequate, hands-on regulation of schools must take place in order to ensure that inclusion is happening and that parents have responsive, timely and independent avenues to bring any concerns about the child's school experience to.

Disciplinary Rules and Measures

During our *Invisible Children* study into exclusion and withdrawal among autistic schoolchildren, it emerged that a significant cohort were on reduced timetables. As we engaged with the families involved in our survey, a trend emerged suggesting that several parents (22%) felt that their child's reduced school days was in itself a disciplinary measure from the school.²² This was corroborated by a separate study that the Oireachtas' Education and Skills Committee undertook into the same topic. It was found that whilst some schools opted to use a reduced timetable if appropriate supports for the student were unavailable, others used it as a form of discipline.²³

As has been repeatedly highlighted throughout this document, autism's complexity can give way to numerous misconceptions about the condition and those living with it. Such misunderstandings are acutely felt when it comes to the issue of how autism impacts upon an individual's navigation with the environment they find themselves in, as well as the people around them. In a bustling classroom or traversing a corridor during class changes, there are risks for miscommunication, anxiety, confusion, and sensory overload for an autistic young person. From the perspective of a staff member unfamiliar with the condition, a student stimming by jumping up and down or running might appear to be disruptive or unruly. Indeed, if a meltdown occurs, an autistic person may become especially expressive as they attempt to self-regulate, particularly with younger children where it is often misinterpreted as a temper tantrum.

In instances where authorities respond to situations where an autistic student is exhibiting 'challenging behaviour' with disciplinary measures, this can lead to an increased risk of further exclusion; and even an outright breach of a child's constitutional right to an education²⁴ by improper use of reduced timetables and indefinite suspensions²⁵.

Accounting for these risks and their root causes is therefore a crucial step for schools in facilitating an understanding environment for their autistic students. Key to this process is embedding additional opportunities for training of best practices around engaging

²² AslAm. (April 2019). *Invisible Children: A Survey on School Absence and Withdrawal in Ireland's Autism Community*. Pg.17.

²³ Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills. (June 2019). *Interim Report on the Committee's Examination on the Current Use of Reduced Timetables*. Pg.5.

²⁴ *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Constitution of Ireland, enacted 1937). Article 42.2 (on Education).

²⁵ AslAm. (April 2019). *Invisible Children: A Survey on School Absence and Withdrawal in Ireland's Autism Community*. Pgs.3-4.

with autistic students during ITE and throughout educators' CPD. AsIAM would advise, to this end to:

- Autism-proof existing disciplinary practices within individual schools, so as that every option is exhausted before recommending a reduced school timetable or suspension is in the best interest of the autistic student;
- Publish Departmental guidelines on the use of restraint in schools
- Augment the existing continuum of CPD courses with new content, specifically aimed at informing teaching professionals about autism and what best practices exist for engaging autistic pupils' needs at different stages in-class, and;
- Collaborate with like-minded professionals and organisations, such as charities and advocacy groups, in developing autism-specific CPD courses for inclusive education.

Peer Understanding and Anti-Bullying Procedures

The EPSEN Act 2004 (Section 14) requires schools to "*inculcate in students of the school an awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities.*" We recognise that young people are often great ambassadors of inclusion with a real desire to understand and accept difference. However, we are also aware that a universal understanding of disability amongst Irish students is far from a universal reality, and that bullying is an all too common experience for their autistic peers.

This can manifest itself through a plethora of guises, ranging from quiet ostracism during group activities to targeted and very explicit harassment of an autistic person. Contemporary literature has consistently demonstrated that autistic students are disproportionately affected by bullying than those with other or no SENs.²⁶ In fact, it is plausibly argued that those with milder learning/social difficulties and who attend mainstream schools are especially vulnerable to victimisation, because of little understanding about their differences amongst the wider student body.²⁷

This lack of awareness cuts to the core of AsIAM's many concerns about implementing a "New Brunswick Style" Total Inclusion Model into Irish schools in the immediate term. Whilst enrolling in mainstream schools *theoretically* affords opportunities for mixing and

²⁶ Maïano, C., et al. (2016). "Prevalence of School Bullying Among Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Autism Research*. 9. Pg.609.

²⁷ Humphrey, NI & Hebron, J. (2015). "Bullying of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Conditions: a 'state of the field' review." *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 19:8. Pg.855.

learning new social skills to students on the autism spectrum, a huge risk to their wellbeing remains at play if a culture of acceptance and diversity is not already instilled within the school community - among students *and* staff alike. The fact that autism is often an 'invisible disability' in practice makes spotting instances of harassment and exclusion all the more difficult, for staff members, bystanding pupils, and of course the autistic victim themselves.

AsIAM would nonetheless caution against viewing the development of an anti-bullying ethos as a top-down exercise. Students have an equally vital part to contribute in making their spaces for learning and socialising genuinely inclusive and affirming. We have seen numerous examples of individual schools across the country taking exemplary initiative in raising awareness about minority groups within their respective communities, particularly for LGBTQ+ students or those from an ethnic minority. AsIAM believes that similar projects would be ideal templates to work off of towards fostering autism awareness in the same spirit.

Children's and Families' Roles as Valued Stakeholders

No significant change should take place in regards to special education, or the creation of a roadmap for greater inclusion, which is not directly informed by the voices of students with disabilities and their parents. It is essential that autistic young people are consulted directly and widely in relation to this policy proposal, and that their voices clearly shine through any final proposal's recommendations.

In a policy area as broad and complex as inclusive education, it is imperative to draw on as many perspectives as possible so as to possess a fuller understanding of the disparities in service provisions and best practices for autistic pupils across the country. Indeed, the deterioration in so many families' communication with their childrens' schools since the pandemic's outset has not only exacerbated these imbalances, but also highlighted a fundamental need for directly involving parents in planning their autistic children's developmental pathway.

AsIAM calls for the drafting of formal guidelines for educators on proactively facilitating the engagement of autistic students and their families, and indeed, other cohorts of pupils with disabilities. We recognise that many mainstream schools across the country maintain close working relationships with their autistic students and their families; as

much was borne out within the Inspectorate's latest report at a primary level.²⁸ What was also clear from the report, however, was the need to consult parents more meaningfully, particularly during the individualised planning process at post-primary stage.²⁹ This issue has become increasingly prominent in the correspondence AsIAM has received since lockdown's commencement. Numerous families have spoken candidly about their fears over lapses in regular contact, as well as contradictory educational advice, from their children's schools.³⁰

The development of a clear and specific set of guidelines would, in our view, signal a significant recognition of autistic student's unique challenges from the Department and the NCSE. In drafting them with a clear view to actively consult students and their families, such advice would actualise a key pillar of CRPD's ethos in meaningfully including autistic voices in shaping decisions directly affecting them; as well as according due respect to parents' constitutional rights as the final arbiters of their children's education.³¹ Crucial to this, therefore, is explicitly outlining specific means whereby autistic children and their families can feed into the decision-making process, as well as establishing a clear avenue of appeals if they feel their views have not been taken into account. Closely tied to this will be the updating and full commencement of existing legislation, namely the EPSEN Act 2004³² and the Disability Act 2005.

Similarly, AsIAM reiterates our caution against viewing inclusive collaboration through tunnel vision. Autism's nature as a whole-of-life condition, informing a person's very identity and their ability to interact with the world around them, necessitates an appreciation of its intersectionality across various areas of daily life. Truly valuing autistic individuals and their families as stakeholders must, therefore, proactively involve their voices in *any* and *all* initiatives for improving public services' accessibility and delivery. Such a recognition for greater consultation and how multiple policy areas compliment one another's goals is reflected in the HSE's review of health services for autistic people.³³

²⁸Inspectorate. (May 2020). *Education Provision for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland*. Pg.36.

²⁹ Ibid. Pg.58.

³⁰ An average of 31% of the total correspondence which AsIAM received between March and July 2020 directly related to concerns around education for autistic children.

³¹ *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Constitution of Ireland, enacted in 1937). Article 42.1 (on Education).

³² Specifically, we would urge the Government to update and fully commence those sections of the EPSEN Act pertaining to assessments (Sections 3-6), Individual Education Plans (Sections 3,4,5,8,9,11,12), and the establishment of a Special Education Appeals Board (Sections 36-37).

³³ Health Service Executive. (December 2018). *Report of the Review of the Irish Health Services for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Pg.19.

Key Recommendations

- **Maintain the distinction between special schools and mainstream schools;**
- 'Autism-proof' codes of behaviour within schools and the physical layouts of their classrooms to allow for meeting pupils' sensory processing needs;
- Future training for educational professionals at all levels must include detailed information around autism awareness and best practices into their courses' core content;
- **Schools must explore all options available to them** before recommending that autistic pupils sitting in a mainstream setting with overly complex should be transferred to a special school;
- Obligate primary and post-primary mainstream schools to develop and implement Student Support Files (SSFs) for autistic pupils;
- Any development for future special classes and or schools from NCSE and DES should be a **consultative and holistic undertaking**, involving stakeholders from right across the school community. These include the pupils themselves, families, teaching staff, educational psychologists, SENOs, and boards of management members;
- All decision-making bodies and processes around pupils' educational and personal development **must involve students and their families;**
- The Department of Education to prepare a detailed circular on recruiting and retaining a statutory member with a professional background in special education onto a mainstream school's Board of Management;
- **Autism-proof existing disciplinary practices within mainstream schools**, so as that every option is exhausted before recommending a reduced school timetable or suspension is in the best interest of the autistic student;
- Reassess how SEN teaching professionals are currently deployed, so as new targets can be clearly set to work towards reducing the student:teacher ratio in classes;

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