



21 June 2011

Dear Minister Quinn,

In reply to a question from Deputy Catherine Murphy TD in the Dail on 30th March 2011, you asked for suggestions from parent representative organisations as to how the allocation of SNA resources for 2011/12 and going forward, can be best managed within the context of the overall limit on SNA numbers that has been established by the previous government.

Special Needs Parents Association recognises and appreciates the fiscal constraints that the government and country are under. It is with this in mind, that we are making the following suggestions. While we recognise the need to make do with the capped level of SNA's, we are equally of the view that, to have any prospect of success in relation to the management of SNA resources, the NCSE and the schools must proactively involve parents as equal partners in all stages of that process. Without this early commitment the debate over the future management of SNA resources will remain fractious and unproductive.

In our experience, the main issues arise due to a breakdown in the channel of communications between the administrators of the Special Education system, the school and the parents. When parents make contact with the Special Needs Parents Association for advice on matters relating to the special educational supports, the majority of problems reported arise from one or more of the following situations:

- Miscommunication between school and parent.
- Misconceptions by parents as to the role and responsibilities of SNA (as evidenced in the VFM review on expenditure on the Special Needs Assistants scheme June 2011) and how they are allocated.
- Lack of direct oral and written communication between SENOs and parents which disenfranchises parents (It is currently dependent on each individual SENO as to whether they engage directly with parents)

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We are proposing the following series of changes that we feel will not put any further financial strain on the DES, but rather make the processes more efficient.

The NCSE, DES, HSE, Citizens Information Bureau and the Special Needs Parents Association jointly hosting a series of nationwide information days for parents and educators to overcome the common issues that creates the most frustration for parents. We have identified the following key areas as being the route cause for many of the queries and complaints that the Association receives which would provide a framework.

1. Clarify the obligations of parents and schools to satisfy the requirements of the NCSE and DES in order to provide appropriate supports for children with special needs.
2. Clarify the role and responsibilities of an SNA for both parents and educators.
3. Clarify the role and responsibilities of a SENO and the processes involved in reviews and allocations of resources.
4. Inform parents of the different processes of allocations in mainstream schools, special schools and ASD Units.
5. A requirement on the schools to copy all communication's from the NCSE and the school to the parents of the child concerned.
6. An independent appeals process that does not have to go through the school. It is not acceptable that the main stakeholders are not able to make an appeal directly to the NCSE. It is a serious legal flaw in the operations of the NCSE and we feel could lead to serious ramifications for the NCSE and the DES if they were found in court to have been negligent, in the way that they provided leave to appeal for a child with special needs and their parents.
7. Better communications between the NCSE and the parents concerned.

The Special Needs Parents Association is committed to liasing between government bodies and parents of children with special needs, to provide solution based strategies to maximise the efficiencies of resources currently allocated by the NCSE, within the confines of the current cap of 10575 SNAs. Having previously identified the system failures to the previous government and Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on several occasions, we are eager to move forward with our proposals to address the areas indicated, which we believe will ameliorate many of the issues that parents of children with special needs have highlighted when they seek support and advice from the Special Needs Parents Association.

Regards

Noel Cuddy
Chairperson

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