RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

CONDUCTED BY

Hibernia College

ICEP europe
Institute of Child Education and Psychology

# The Growth in Demand for Special Classes and Special Schools in Ireland

*An Examination of Key Drivers*


SPEAKERS

**Dr Mary Kelly** , President, Hibernia College

**Dr Deirdre MacIntyre** , Dean of Research and Academic Affairs, ICEP Europe

# Research questions behind the study

| | |
|---|---|
| **RQ1** | What drivers contributed to the increasing demand for special class and special school placements? |
| **RQ2** | How have policy changes and societal awareness influenced this trend? |
| **RQ3** | How have clinical diagnoses influenced this trend? |
| **RQ4** | What are the experiences and perspectives of different stakeholders regarding special education placement needs? |
| **RQ5** | How can the education and health systems, including policymakers, better respond to this demand? |

02 · POLICY CONTEXT

# Policy landscape

### A RENEWED VISION · NCSE (2024)

A rights -based approach, focused on enabling all students to access high quality, meaningful education in their local communities, alongside their peers -

### A COMPLEX LEARNER POPULATION

The inclusive agenda acknowledges the complexity of needs across the learner population and reinforces the State's commitment to appropriate supports in a range of settings

### QUESTIONS RAISED BY EXPANSION

The significant expansion of special classes and special schools raises questions about mainstream capacity, equitable access to provision, and the factors contributing to increasing demand for specialist placements

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

**How can Ireland respond to the the growing demand for specialist specialist educational provision provision while progressing towards its long-term vision of inclusive education?**

Understanding the factors driving this demand is critical to informing future policy, planning and provision.

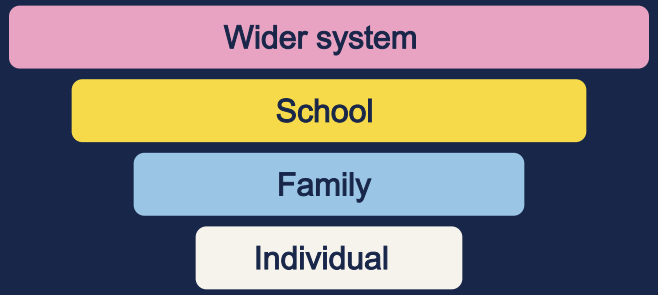
# Mixed methods with a Theory of Change lens

Data from **Desk-based review** **Surveys** **Semi-structured interviews** **Focus groups** **Visual methods**

THEORY OF CHANGE

## An interpretative lens

Used to examine how factors interact to shape demand for special class and special school places




DESK - BASED REVIEW

### Policy landscape review

National policy and legislation, research on inclusion, and education – health collaboration

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### National and international trends trends

Policy approaches in jurisdictions including Finland, England and New Zealand

STAKEHOLDER VOICES

### Many perspectives

Parents, teachers, school leaders, SNAs, students and other key stakeholders

INTEGRATION

### One holistic picture

Quantitative and qualitative findings interpreted together across all data sources

# Data collection

| DATA COLLECTION POINT | SESSIONS | PARTICIPANTS |
|---|---|---|
| Online survey | 1 | 1,217 |
| Semi-structured interviews | 27 | 27 |
| Stakeholder focus group* | 1 | 4 |
| Online focus groups | 15 | 49 |
| In-person focus groups (parents) | 5 | 21 |
| In-person focus groups (students) | 6 | 33 |

* Held in lieu of a series of semi -structured interviews with members of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Youth

NATIONAL ONLINE SURVEY

**1,217**

responses, from a survey distributed to all 3,949 primary, post -primary and special schools

RESPONDENTS BY SCHOOL TYPE



# Referrals and diagnoses are rising

**PRIMARY SCHOOL**
**963 → 3,919**
+307%

**POST - PRIMARY SCHOOL**
**142 → 609**
+329%

**SPECIAL SCHOOL**
**14 → 52**
+271%

**AUTISM AFTER AON**
**29% → 54%**
of children identified with autism after an Assessment of Need, 2015 to 2022

| HSE REFERRALS TO THE NCSE | 2022 | | 2023 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School setting | Received from HSE | Resolved | Received from HSE | Reports sent to HSE AOs | Resolved |
| **Primary school** | 963 | 114 | 3,919 | 1,170 | 1,275 |
| **Post-primary school** | 142 | 15 | 609 | 223 | 245 |
| **Special school** | 14 | 1 | 52 | 15 | 16 |
| **Early learning and childcare** | ** | ** | 1,285 | 121 | 135 |
| **Other** | 652 | 2 | 401 | 19 | 43 |
| **Total** | **1,771** | **132** | **6,266** | **1,548** | **1,714** |

Sources: NCSE (2024f; 2024g); Smyth and Russell (2024) · AO: HSE assessment officer · ** Data unavailable

# Special classes have led the expansion

STUDENTS SUPPORTED

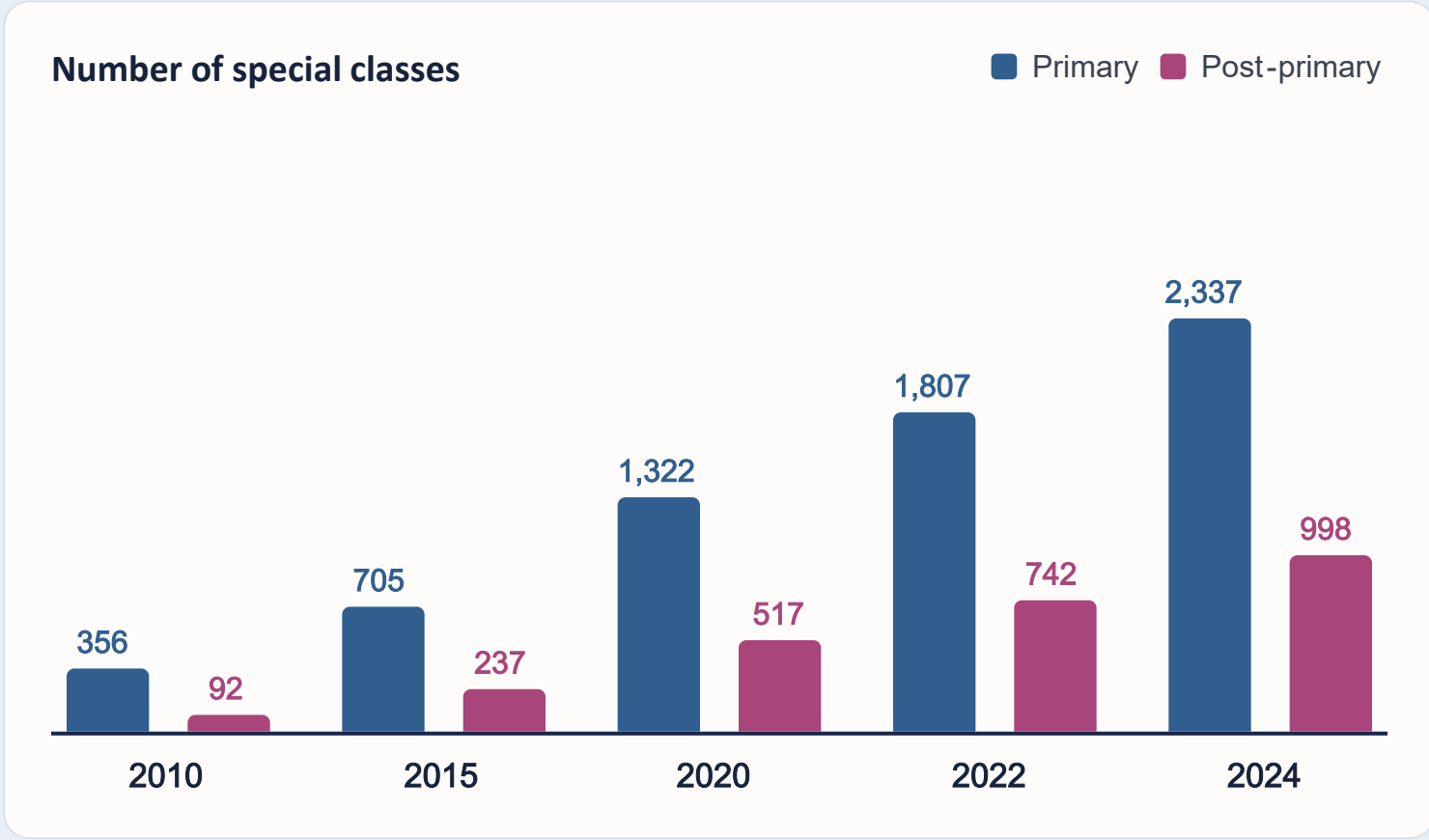
**+349%**

in special classes, 2012/13 to 2023/24

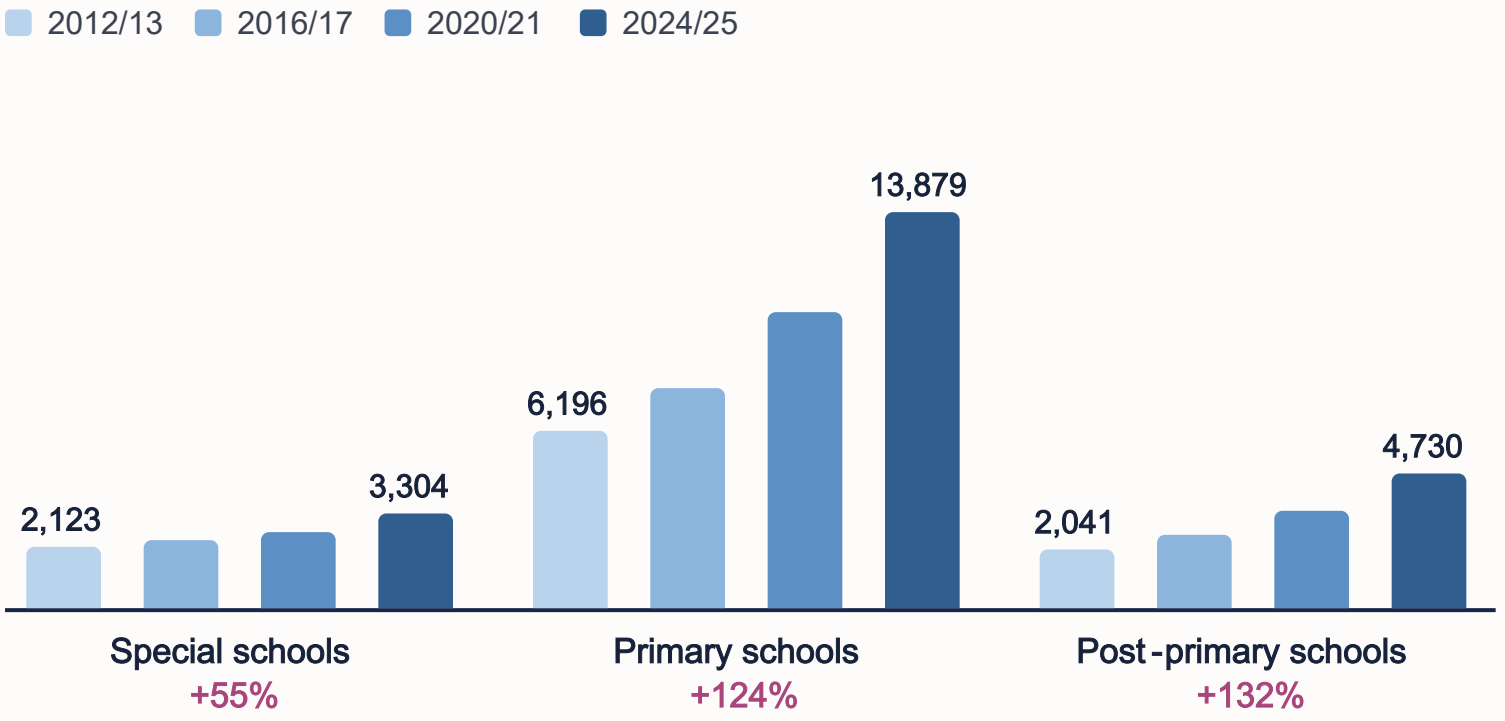
**+18%**

in special schools, 2012/13 to 2022/23

Around 9 in 10 special classes are autism classes



# Staffing has grown alongside provision




TEACHERS FOR SPECIAL CLASSES

Mainstream schools, 2014 to 2024

Primary

**650 → 2,338** +260%

Post-primary

**301.5 → 1,494.5** +396%

BUDGET 2025

**+768 special education teachers and +1,600 SNAs**

The Department says this brings SNAs to over 23,000, the highest level to date

Sources: NCSE (2017c; 2018b; 2020; 2024c –e); Department of Education and Youth (2024b)

# Trends in England, Finland and New Zealand

| | |
|---|---|
| **Rising demand** | All three report increasing SEN identification and demand for additional support, particularly for autism and complex needs |
| **Different approaches to support** | England relies more heavily on formal statutory plans, while Finland and New Zealand emphasise graduated, needs -led support within mainstream schools |
| **Mainstream capacity pressures** | Staffing constraints and limited specialist expertise can increase reliance on special classes and special schools |
| **Diagnosis and assessment** | The role of diagnosis in accessing support varies across jurisdictions, influencing referral pathways and demand for specialist placements |
| **Inclusion alongside specialist provision** | All three countries retain special schools and specialist classes within broader inclusive education systems |

# Locating Ireland within international patterns

**Rising demand for specialist provision is not unique to Ireland**

EHCPs in England rose 10.8% in a single year; in Finland, intensified or special support rose from 16% to 26% (2016 – 2024)

**Growth in special classes should be understood as a system response**

Special classes have expanded alongside, rather than instead of, mainstream inclusion efforts

**Demand patterns are influenced by system organisation**

HSE referrals to primary special classes rose 307% (2022 –2023), yet only 1,275 of 3,919 were resolved

**Specialist provision often expands during during periods of reform**

Special classes grew through the 2017 SET reform and its 2024 refinement; EHCPs have risen every year since 2014

**Ongoing NCSE initiatives reflect an active commitment to inclusion**

Strengthening early support, school capacity and coordination across services

**Current demand signals need to be interpreted contextually**

As indicators of how systems are adapting to complexity within inclusive frameworks

# Study Limitations

Variability in internal communication processes may have resulted in uneven access to the survey across schools

The timeframe for data collection and analysis also presented a limitation

Challenges in securing participation from the target cohort

Scale of the overall population in comparison to the study sample

Perspectives of health and clinical services was small

# Findings

## DIRECT DRIVERS

| | |
|---|---|
| D1 | Increased parental awareness of SEN |
| D2 | Rising incidence of SEN diagnosis |
| D3 | Perceived limited support in mainstream classes |
| D4 | Impact of policy |

## INDIRECT DRIVERS

| | |
|---|---|
| ID1 | Complexity of children's needs |
| ID2 | Impact on school communities |
| ID3 | Access to a diagnosis of need |
| ID4 | Fragmentation in the education and health systems |

# Direct drivers of demand

| | DRIVER | WHAT THE STUDY FOUND |
|---|---|---|
| D1 | Parental awareness of SEN | **The most substantial driver.** Parents are better informed, more attuned to their children's rights and entitlements, and more proactive in seeking specialist provision |
| D2 | Rising incidence of diagnosis | Particularly autism and specific learning disabilities; formal diagnosis remains a key pathway to identifying need and establishing eligibility |
| D3 | Perceived limited mainstream support | Perceived gaps in the availability, intensity and consistency of supports make it more likely that specialist provision is sought |
| D4 | Impact of policy | Policy shapes eligibility criteria, assessment pathways, entitlements and access to specialist provision |

# Parental awareness: the key direct driver

*"If you don't live it, you don't understand"*

Parent 4, in -person focus group

SURVEY EVIDENCE

**71%**

of 735 respondents ranked parental awareness as the main driver, the highest -ranked factor

**81%**

reported more SEN -related parental enquiries: half a major increase, 31% a slight increase (n=413)

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- Awareness is emotionally driven: anxiety about outcomes shapes decisions
- Social networks reduce stigma, but spread doubts about mainstream support
- Choosing specialist provision reflects system factors, not a rejection of inclusion

*"Parents are the drivers, really…… the driver in terms of providing reports for special schools and classes is usually the parent."*

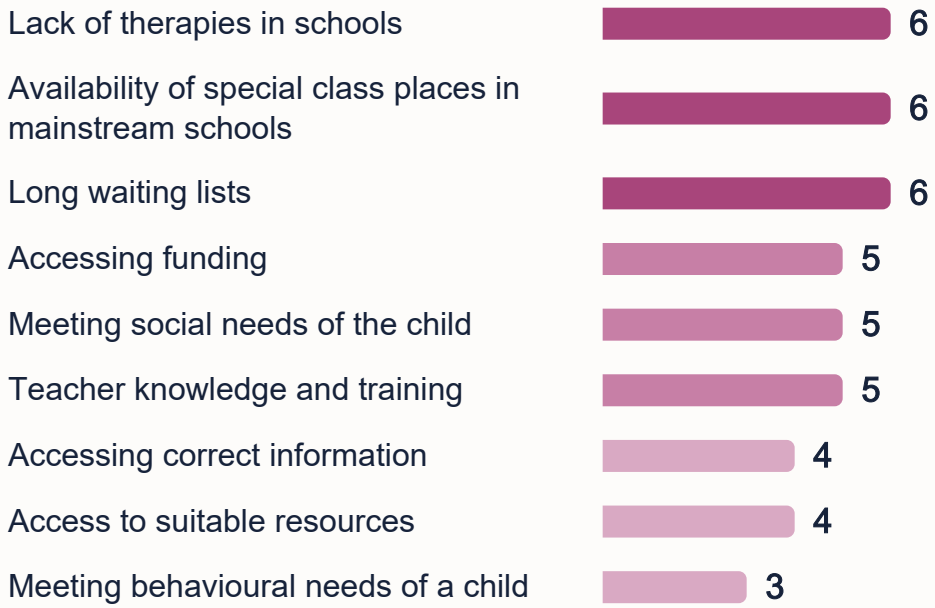
Clinical professional (online interview)

*"Social media, you know, parents are in contact with one another now, like never before, and a narrative has taken hold that you're not going to get the desired level of support in mainstream."*

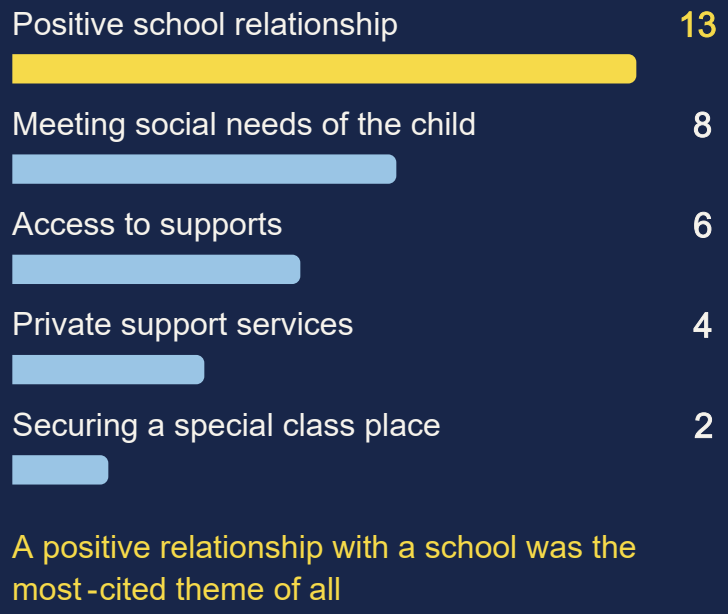
Management body (online interview)

Parents mapped their journey through the education and health systems on a visual road, adding post -its for challenges and oppor tunities. **Bars show the number of post -its per theme.**

## CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED




## OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED




A positive relationship with a school was the most-cited theme of all

*"Surely the increased demand stems from increased diagnosis!"*

Post-primary management (online survey)

SURVEY EVIDENCE

**88%**

of respondents (n=815) saw an increase in students receiving a formal clinical diagnosis

REPORTING A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE




WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- Formal diagnosis remains a key pathway to identifying need and eligibility
- Stakeholders see the link between diagnosis and demand as immediate and causal
- Growth has centred on autism; children with other needs struggle to find places

*"While this has undoubtedly improved provision for pupils with ASD, it has also created an imbalance in the system.... children children with non-ASD needs are increasingly increasingly finding it difficult to access appropriate placements or support."*

Primary Principal, online survey

*"I don't want him in an ASD class because he's because he's dyslexic and dyscalculia and I and I want that accommodated"*

Parent, focus group

*"In mainstream I was by myself at the back. I couldn't read and now in two years I can read and read and write."*

Student Y, focus group

SURVEY EVIDENCE

Could meet SEN needs well or very well




**84%**

of respondents said their initial teacher education did not prepare them to support students with SEN

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Large classes and limited SNA support push families towards special classes

Trust in local mainstream schools has eroded for some families

Parents asked for smaller classes, more SNA support, sensory rooms and SEN training

*"My child had to come out of mainstream mainstream because the teacher couldn't cope couldn't cope with 31 students in the class." class."*

Parent 6, focus group

*"Children's needs are just not being met in mainstream. They need a setting with trained staff and adequate resources to meet their needs."*

Primary, SET (online survey)

## MAIN CRITICISMS OF POLICY

1. Knee-jerk, reactive policy
2. Over-influenced by advocacy and lobbying groups
3. Lack of practical resources to implement policy
4. Lack of coordination between health and education
5. Disconnect between policy and what happens in schools

## HEALTH POLICIES CITED

AON (Disability Act 2005) and Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People Policy

## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Few specific education policies were named; comments focused on general policy trends

Some see CDNT and AON delays shifting demand onto schools

Frustration with how inclusion is enacted increases specialist demand

*"Policy intent (inclusion + more places) has often outpaced delivery (trained teachers, SNAs, physical places, allied health supports), so demand has risen faster than capacity can respond."*

SET teacher (online survey)

*"… students enter school without or intervention, and schools become the default default providers of care, increasing demand demand for special education settings with with on-site supports."*

Special School teacher (online survey)

Notable increases in **Emotional wellbeing difficulties** **Behavioural concerns** **Co-occurring needs**

IN MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS

## Committed, but underprepared

Teachers and SNAs show strong commitment to inclusive practice, yet many feel underprepared to support the level and intensity of need now present

Staff wellbeing concerns include burnout and, in serious cases, incidents of physical assault

WHAT THE FINDINGS CALL FOR

STAFFING

### The main resourcing need

Additional SNAs, more specialist teachers and the introduction of teaching assistants

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

### Preparing for complexity

Regular, ongoing professional learning and effective Initial Teacher Education

SPECIALIST SUPPORT

### Expertise on hand

Specialised supports, appropriately trained staff and in-school inter-agency supports

INFRASTRUCTURE

### School buildings

Resourcing needs relating to school buildings were also raised

WHAT SCHOOL STAFF DESCRIBE

## A clear commitment to inclusion

School leaders, SEN coordinators, teachers and SNAs highlight relationships, care and responsiveness to individual needs

WHAT FAMILIES EXPERIENCE

## Inclusion experienced unevenly

Evidence from parents and young people, with rising disengagement and early school leaving at post -primary, points to variability in practice

COMMITMENT AND CAPACITY

**The commitment of people in the system is distinct from the system's system's capacity to deliver inclusion consistently**

Constraints may be Structural Resource Training Placement Support

*Stakeholders are not resistant to inclusion: they are actively seeking to to improve practice and are willing to to engage in professional learning and and system reform.*

Set against **More sophisticated diagnostic tools** **Rising demand for diagnosis**

AS A GATEWAY

### Diagnosis opens access to provision

Formal diagnosis remains a key pathway to identifying need and establishing eligibility for specialist supports

AS A BARRIER

### Delays and private routes shape access

Delays in public diagnostic services and growing reliance on private assessments mean socioeconomic status can influence access to supports

EQUITY RISK

**Diagnostic dependency risks undermining undermining equity, favouring families families who can afford private assessment or navigate complex systems systems**

IMPLICATION

Revisit placement criteria so decisions are needs-based rather than diagnosis-driven, echoing the NCSE's 2024 call to review enrolment criteria and placements

*Fragmentation described as resembling "a jigsaw rather than a series of dynamic and localised events" localised events" (Gibson et al., 2023)*

POLICY INTENT

**Partnership and interagency working**

- Strongly emphasised in recent policy developments
- Effective health –education collaboration seen as critical for students with SEN

LIVED PRACTICE

**Supports that do not join up**

- Health, care and therapeutic services experienced as fragmented and inconsistent
- Difficult to coordinate at school level
- A disconnect between policy intent and practice

THE CONSEQUENCE

**Schools fill the gaps**

- Educators take on informal coordination roles without clear guidance or authority
- Added strain, delays in support and inconsistent provision
- Frustration among families and professionals

# Voices behind the indirect drivers

**I1 · COMPLEXITY OF NEED**

*"We are literally firefighting rather than teaching and learning."*

Mainstream primary school teacher (online survey)

**I2 · SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

*"We dance on the head of a pin every day"*

Mainstream primary school leader (online survey)

**I3 · ACCESS TO DIAGNOSIS**

*"School places can't be accessed without reports. The system The system favours the well-off and that is horrific."*

Mainstream primary school teacher (online survey)

**I4 · FRAGMENTATION**

*"[Parents are] desperately trying to implement what the school the school is telling them to implement, what the community community team is trying to implement, and the child is totally is totally confused in the middle of it."*

Parents' representative (online interview)

# Implications of the study

| DRIVER/S | IMPLICATIONS |
| --- | --- |
| DIRECT DRIVER 1<br>**Increased parental awareness of SEN** | **Recognise parents as key stakeholders** in shaping demand for educational provision.<br>**Build confidence in mainstream inclusion** through effective supports and specialist expertise.<br>**Improve access to information** about available settings and support options.<br>**Enable informed decision -making** by ensuring parents have confidence in the suitability of provision |
| DIRECT DRIVER 2<br>**Increased incidence of diagnosis of SEN** | **Plan for future demand** for special class and special school places.<br>**Expand capacity and resources** to meet the growing need for specialist provision.<br>**Strengthen specialist expertise** to ensure appropriate, needs -led support for children with SEN. |

# Implications of the study

| DRIVER/S | IMPLICATIONS |
| --- | --- |
| DIRECT DRIVER 3<br>**Perceptions of limited support in mainstream classes for children with SEN** | • **Sustained Investment** in resources, specialist expertise and support structures.<br>• **Build Confidence** in mainstream schools' capacity to meet diverse SEN needs.<br>• **Bridge Policy and Practice** to ensure inclusive education is effectively implemented. |
| DIRECT DRIVER 4<br>**Impact of policy**<br>INDIRECT DRIVER 2<br>**Impact on school communities**<br>INDIRECT DRIVER 4<br>**Fragmentation in the education and health systems** | • **Shared Policy Framework:** Aligned policies, joint accountability and clearly defined roles and responsibilities.<br>• **Coordinate services:** Co-located provision and collaborative planning across health and education.<br>• **Wraparound Wellbeing supports:** Wraparound supports for staff to promote inclusive, supportive learning experiences for children with SEN. |

# Implications of the study

| DRIVER/S | IMPLICATIONS |
| --- | --- |
| INDIRECT DRIVER 1<br>Complexity of children's needs<br><br>INDIRECT DRIVER 3<br>Access to a diagnosis of need | **Build capacity** : Ensure all educational settings have appropriate staffing, specialist expertise and targeted resources.<br><br>**Respond to complexity** : Equip provision to meet evolving and increasingly complex needs.<br><br>**Promote equity** : Establish transparent, needs -led access to appropriate educational settings, independent of financial means or access to diagnosis. |



*"My teachers and SNA are the most important people in school to me, as well as my friends."*

— Special class student · in -person focus group

## MORE FROM THE STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS



**Primary school student**
Supportive relationships

*"I need a lot of help…the SNAs help me…I try my best."*



**Mainstream primary student**
Enjoyment of learning

*"I have fun at school…I like reading and playing with friends." friends."*

GROWTH IN DEMAND FOR SPECIAL CLASSES AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS

# Thank you

*Questions and discussion*

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