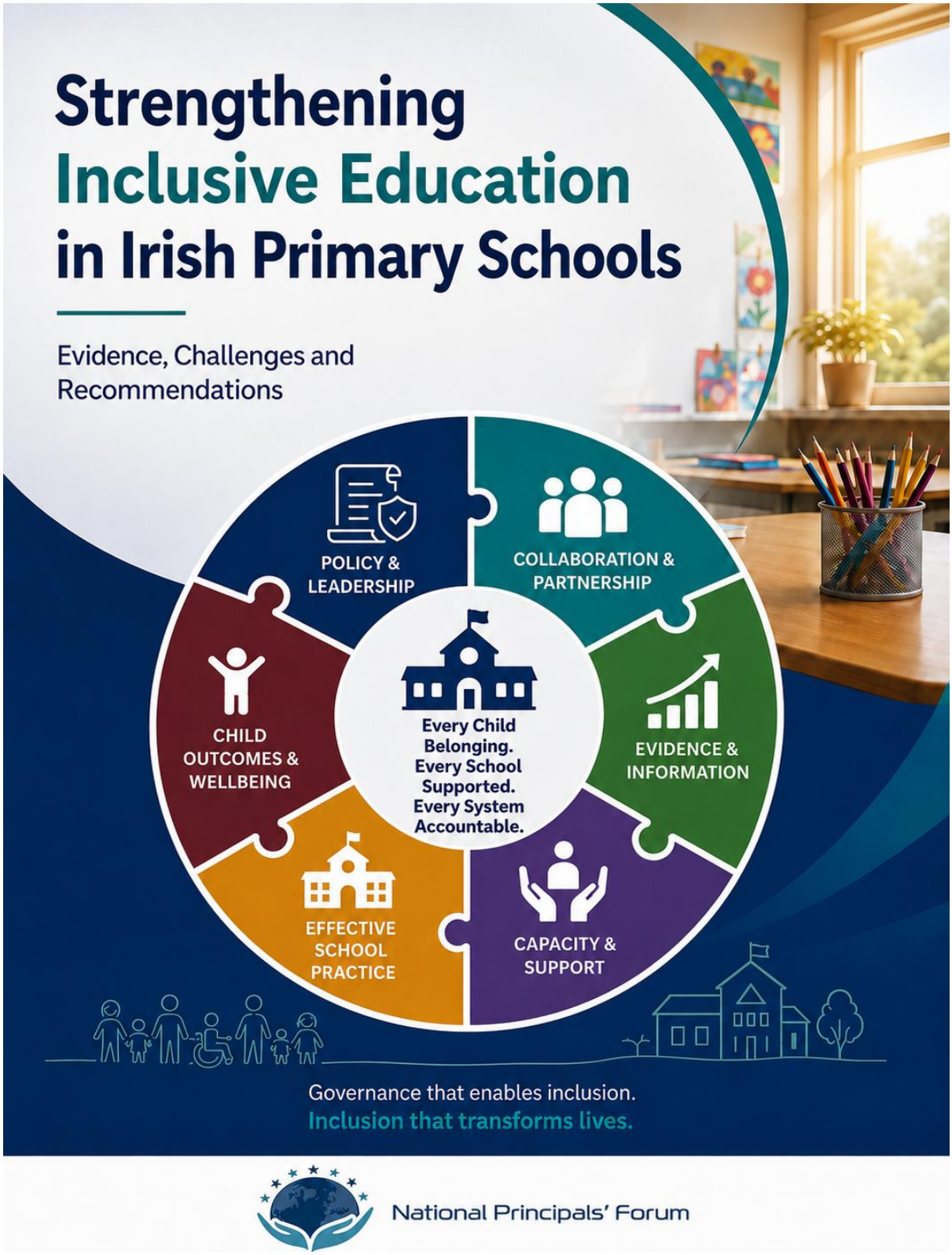

Strengthening
Inclusive Education
in Irish Primary Schools
Evidence, Challenges and Recommendations
POLICY & LEADERSHIP
COLLABORATION & PARTNERSHIP
EVIDENCE & INFORMATION
CAPACITY & SUPPORT
EFFECTIVE SCHOOL PRACTICE
CHILD OUTCOMES & WELLBEING
Every Child Belonging. Every School Supported. Every System Accountable.
Governance that enables inclusion.
Inclusion that transforms lives.
National Principals' Forum

Strengthening Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools

Evidence, Challenges and Recommendations



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National Principals' Forum



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission has been prepared in response to the invitation of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth to contribute to its examination of Inclusive Education, including the allocation, role and training needs of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

The National Principals' Forum (NPF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important examination. The NPF is an independent organisation, established in 2018, comprised of practising primary school principals across Ireland. Our purpose is to ensure that the operational realities of leading schools inform the development of education policy.

School leaders fully support Ireland's commitment to inclusive education and the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Every day, principals, teachers and Special Needs Assistants work to ensure that children with special education needs are welcomed, supported and enabled to participate meaningfully in school life.

This submission is not a critique of inclusive education. It is a call to strengthen it.

Over the past two decades, Ireland has made significant progress in developing a more inclusive education system. Successive Governments have invested substantially in Special Education Teachers, Special Needs Assistants, Special Classes and a wide range of additional supports, enabling increasing numbers of children to attend and participate successfully in their local schools. The National Principals' Forum welcomes this progress.

However, while inclusive education has evolved significantly, the systems used to understand, plan for and resource special educational need have not always evolved at the same pace. Schools are increasingly managing more diverse and complex profiles of need within allocation, governance and information systems that were designed for a different educational landscape.

The central argument of this submission is that the next phase of inclusive education should focus not simply on additional investment, but on strengthening the systems that underpin inclusive education. At the heart of this challenge lies an information gap.

Schools are dynamic environments. New pupils enrol, educational needs evolve, assessments are completed and support requirements change over time. Schools routinely identify, monitor and respond to these changes through the Continuum of Support and Student Support Plans. Yet there is currently no secure national mechanism through which this evolving profile of need can be routinely captured and used to inform educational planning.

As a result, schools often possess a comprehensive understanding of the changing profile of need within their communities, while national planning continues to rely largely on historical allocations, demographic indicators and proxy measures. Without accurate, current and school-informed information, it becomes increasingly difficult to ensure that teaching resources,

Special Needs Assistant allocations and wider system planning remain aligned with the realities experienced by schools and pupils.

The findings presented in this submission draw upon a national survey of 225 primary school principals, previous National Principals' Forum research, ongoing engagement with school leaders across Ireland, briefing material prepared following our meeting with the Minister for Education in March 2026, the formal support of 849 primary schools through the National Principals' Forum petition of May 2026, and a detailed case study illustrating how one school's profile of need differs significantly from the information currently visible within the national allocation system.

Across each of these sources, a remarkably consistent message emerges. School leaders remain firmly committed to inclusive education. However, they consistently report that the systems supporting inclusion are no longer keeping pace with the changing prevalence, complexity and diversity of need within schools.

In response, this submission proposes a practical framework for strengthening inclusive education built around five interconnected pillars: **Policy, Information, Governance, Capacity and Outcomes.** Together, these pillars provide a coherent framework for strengthening inclusive education by improving the quality of information informing decision-making, supporting more responsive planning and resource allocation, strengthening system capacity, enhancing interagency governance and ultimately improving educational outcomes for children.

The recommendations presented throughout this submission are practical, evidence-informed and focused on strengthening the systems that enable inclusive education to succeed. Central among these is the development of a secure national mechanism, integrated within the Primary Online Database (POD) or an equivalent Department system, through which schools can routinely record and update their profile of special educational need. Schools are not seeking to determine policy. They are seeking to inform policy by contributing the information they already hold about the children they support every day.

Ultimately, this submission argues that better information enables better planning; better planning supports more responsive resource allocation; responsive allocation strengthens school capacity; and stronger capacity leads to better outcomes for children. Inclusive education is no longer defined solely by the aspiration to include every child. Its success depends upon our collective capacity to ensure that every child receives the support they need once they are included.

KEY MESSAGES



The evidence and experience presented in this submission point to five key messages that should guide the next phase of inclusive education.

1



Ireland has made significant progress in inclusive education.

Substantial investment and the dedication of school communities have enabled increasing numbers of children to learn and participate in their local schools.

2



Schools remain fully committed to inclusion.

Principals, teachers and Special Needs Assistants demonstrate every day their professionalism, compassion and determination to ensure every child belongs, participates and succeeds.

3



Pupil need has evolved significantly.

Schools are supporting more diverse, complex and intensive profiles of need than at any point in the past.

4



National information systems have not evolved at the same pace.

The absence of up-to-date, school-informed information makes it difficult to plan effectively and allocate resources responsively.

5



Strengthening information, governance and capacity will strengthen inclusive education.

Better information enables better planning, responsive allocation builds capacity, and stronger systems lead to better outcomes for every child.



Strong systems enable strong schools.
Strong schools enable every child to learn, participate, belong and thrive.



National Principals' Forum



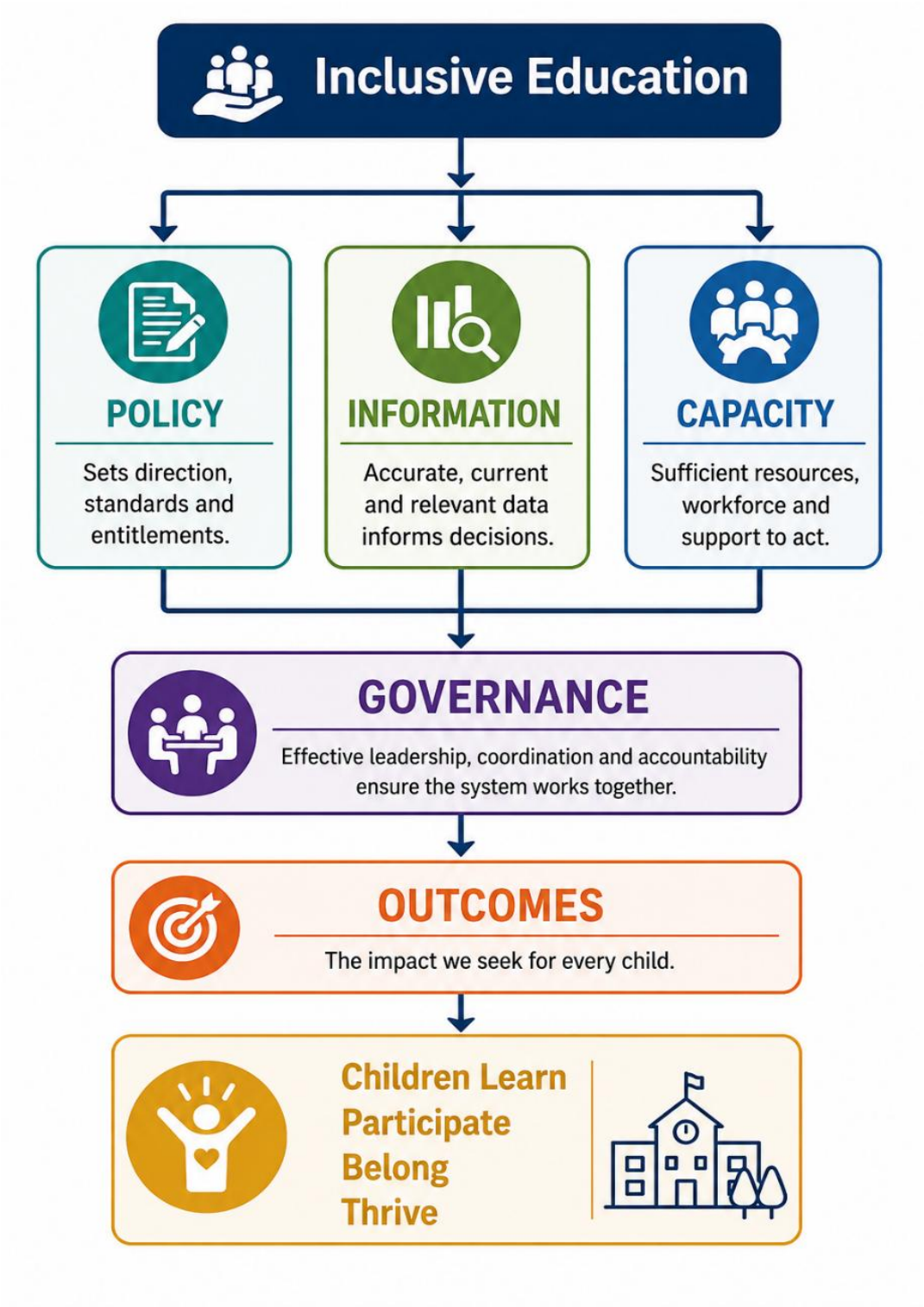


Figure 1: This submission is structured around five interconnected pillars that underpin effective and sustainable inclusive education. Together, these pillars provide the framework through which the National Principals' Forum considers the challenges and recommendations presented in this submission.

From Policy to Outcomes: A Framework for Strengthening Inclusive Education

The National Principals' Forum believes that successful inclusive education depends upon strong connections between policy, information, capacity, governance and outcomes. These elements do not operate independently. Each influences the next, and together they determine schools' capacity to meet the needs of every child.

The framework below illustrates the central argument of this submission. It demonstrates how effective policy depends upon accurate information, how better information supports more responsive planning and resource allocation, how sufficient capacity enables schools to deliver inclusive practice, and how strong governance ultimately leads to better educational outcomes for children.

The chapters that follow explore each of these interconnected elements, drawing upon national evidence, operational experience and practical recommendations to outline a framework for strengthening inclusive education in Irish primary schools.

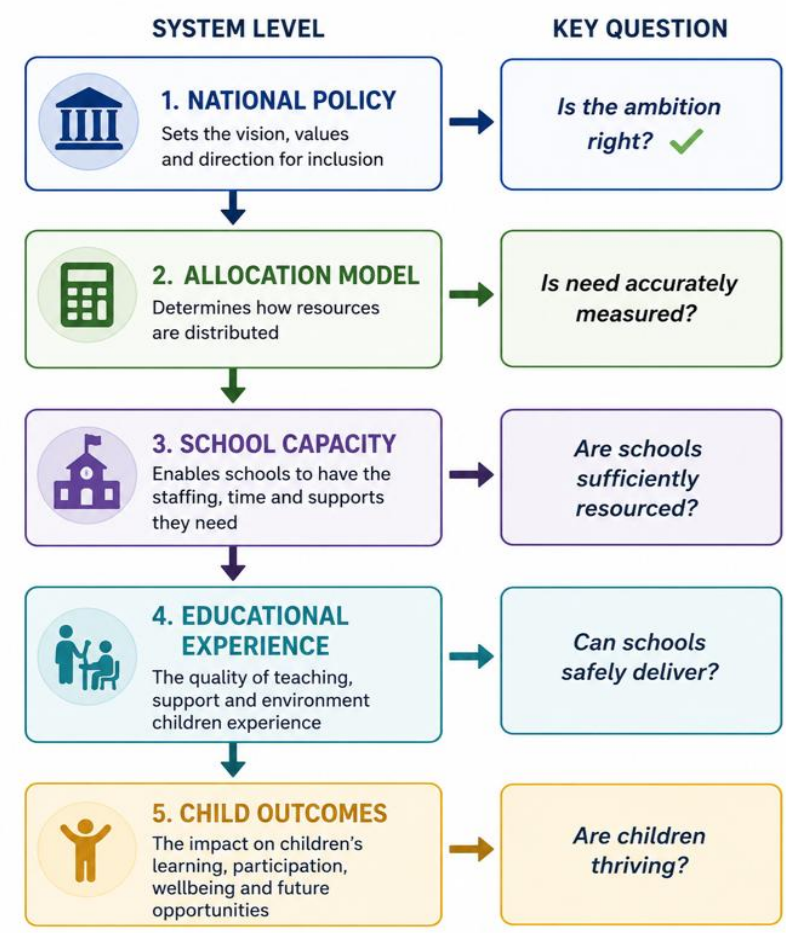


Figure 2: A framework illustrating the interconnected elements that underpin effective inclusive education and the structure of this submission.

Scope of this Submission

This submission does not seek to provide an exhaustive examination of every issue relating to inclusive education, nor does it attempt to address every aspect of special educational provision within the Irish education system. Many important matters, including those affecting particular sectors, services and specialist settings, warrant separate and detailed consideration.

Rather, the National Principals' Forum has sought to focus on the systemic issues that school leaders are uniquely placed to observe through their daily responsibility for implementing inclusive education.

Principals occupy a distinctive position within the education system, working at the intersection of education, health, disability and family support services. This perspective provides a valuable insight into how policy operates in practice, where systems align effectively, and where they are becoming increasingly disconnected.

Accordingly, this submission focuses on the governance, information, capacity and interagency arrangements that underpin successful inclusive education.

Its purpose is to contribute constructively to strengthening those systems so that policy ambition can continue to be translated into meaningful educational outcomes for every child.

CHAPTER 1

Inclusive Education: Setting the Context



Ireland has made significant progress in advancing inclusive education over the past two decades. The expansion of Special Education Teacher (SET) provision, the growth in Special Needs Assistant (SNA) supports, the development of Special Classes, and the State's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) reflect a clear national commitment to ensuring that every child can participate meaningfully in education within their local community wherever possible.

The National Principals' Forum warmly welcomes this progress and fully supports the principle of inclusive education. Every day, principals, teachers, Special Education Teachers, Special Needs Assistants and wider school communities work with professionalism, compassion and commitment to ensure that children with special education needs are welcomed, supported and enabled to learn, participate, belong and thrive.

The central question addressed in this submission is therefore not whether Ireland is committed to inclusion. It is whether the systems responsible for delivering inclusion have evolved at the same pace as the changing profile of need now present in our schools.

The principal challenge facing inclusive education is no longer one of policy ambition. Rather, it is one of system capacity and governance.

Over the past decade, schools have experienced profound change. Today's primary schools support increasing numbers of pupils presenting with increasingly diverse and complex learning, developmental, behavioural, communication, medical and social-emotional needs. At the same time, expectations of schools have expanded significantly.

Schools are no longer solely places of teaching and learning. They have become the point at which education, health, disability and family support services intersect. Principals now coordinate relationships with parents and a wide range of education, health and disability agencies, while increasingly being required to coordinate complex systems of support extending well beyond the traditional remit of education.

Throughout this period, school leaders have consistently demonstrated flexibility, professionalism and innovation. However, many of the systems underpinning inclusive education have not evolved at the same pace.

Consequently, principals increasingly find themselves managing pressures that originate beyond the school gate. Children arrive at school each day requiring support regardless of whether assessments have been completed, therapeutic interventions are available or external services have capacity to respond. Schools willingly embrace this responsibility because every child matters. However, commitment alone cannot indefinitely compensate for limitations elsewhere within the system.

This submission does not question Ireland's commitment to inclusion, nor does it advocate a return to previous models of provision. Rather, it argues that the next phase of inclusive education should focus on strengthening the governance systems that support schools by ensuring that policy ambition is matched by accurate information, responsive allocation systems, sufficient workforce capacity and effective interagency collaboration.

These concerns are not new. They have been consistently raised through previous National Principals' Forum research, submissions, engagement with education stakeholders and, most recently, discussions with the Minister for Education. Their persistence suggests they are not isolated operational difficulties but enduring structural issues affecting the successful implementation of inclusive education.

The evidence presented throughout this submission - findings from the National Principals' Forum's survey of 225 primary schools, previous national research and ongoing engagement with school leaders - demonstrates that these experiences are widely shared across the primary education sector.

This submission therefore examines how inclusive education is governed, how decisions are informed, and how policy can continue to evolve so that schools have the information, capacity, resources and support necessary to deliver meaningful inclusion for every child.

While Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants play indispensable roles, the mainstream classroom teacher remains the primary educator of every child. Inclusive education therefore depends upon building the capacity of the entire school workforce through high-quality professional learning, access to specialist expertise, effective leadership and coordinated support. It is a whole-school endeavour.



Figure 3: Inclusive education succeeds when every layer of the system is supported. Weakness at any level transfers pressure to the level below.

Inclusive education succeeds when every layer of the system is supported. Weakness at any level transfers pressure to the level below.

Ultimately, successful inclusion cannot be measured solely by where a child is educated. It should be measured by whether every child can access learning, participate meaningfully in school life, experience a sense of belonging and receive the support necessary to reach their potential.

CHAPTER 2

The Evolution of Special Educational Needs Provision in Irish Primary Schools

Understanding the challenges facing inclusive education requires an understanding of how Ireland's approach to special educational provision has evolved over the past two decades.

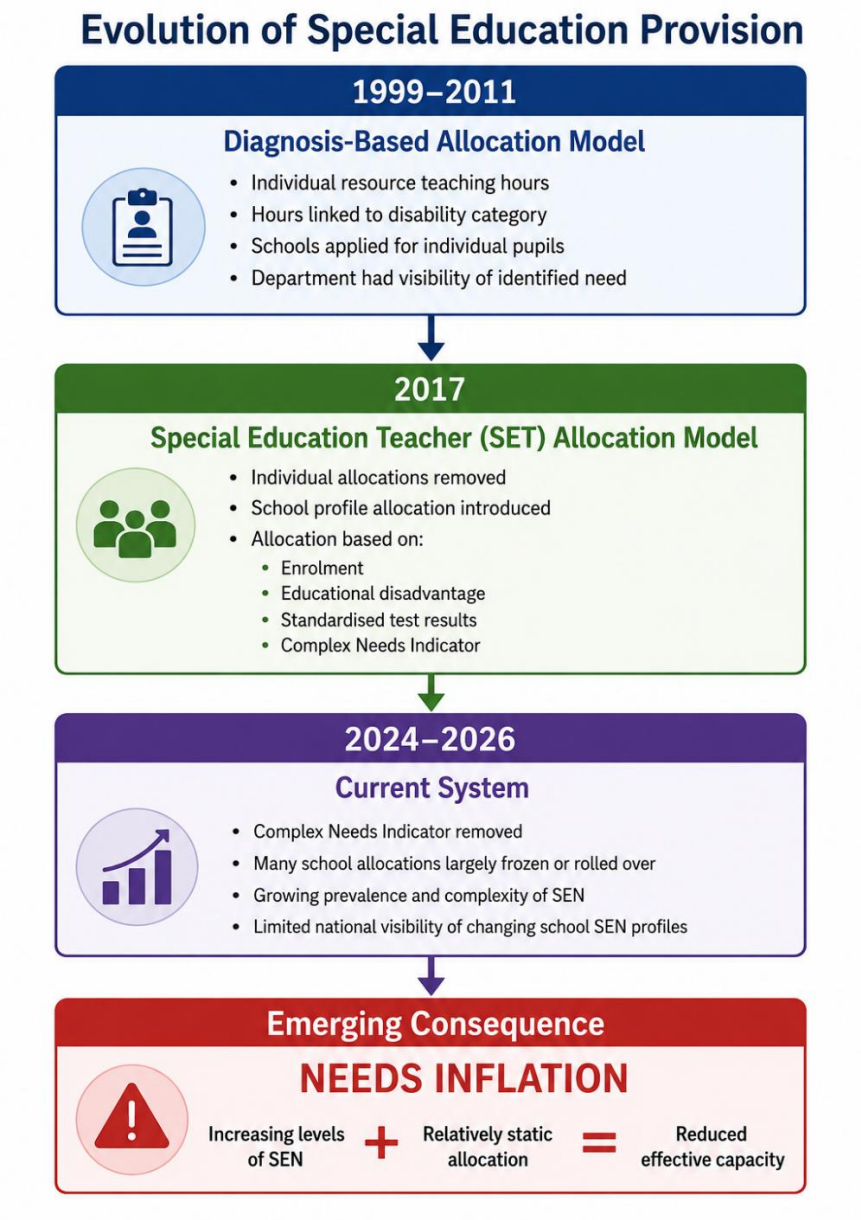


Figure 4: How we have arrived at the current system.

Successive reforms have transformed the education system from one based largely on individual entitlements linked to diagnosis to one that seeks to allocate resources at whole-school level. These reforms have delivered significant benefits, including earlier intervention, greater flexibility for schools and a reduced reliance on diagnosis as the gateway to support.

These reforms delivered important benefits, including earlier intervention, greater flexibility for schools and reduced reliance on diagnosis as the gateway to support.

However, while inclusive education policy has evolved significantly, the systems used to understand, measure and respond to changing educational need have not developed at the same pace.

This chapter outlines that evolution and explains why many schools now experience an increasing disconnect between the profile of need they manage each day and the mechanisms used to allocate specialist educational resources.

2.1 The Early Resource Allocation Model (1999-2011)

The modern framework for special educational provision began with the introduction of Resource Teaching in 1999 and was consolidated through Special Education Circular SP ED 02/05 in 2005.

Schools were granted Learning Support hours (GAM - High Incidence Hours) and Resource Hours (Low Incidence Hours) based on several metrics (GAM) and individual applications (Resource).

Schools retained a degree of flexibility regarding how these hours were deployed, while the Department simultaneously possessed an accurate national picture of the prevalence of identified special educational needs because each qualifying pupil generated an identifiable teaching allocation.

It encouraged increasing reliance on diagnosis as the gateway to support, often delayed intervention while assessments were awaited and created inequities between children with similar educational needs but different diagnoses.

In times of austerity, there were also 15% cuts made to these allocations, which were never subsequently reversed.

These limitations ultimately informed the development of a new allocation model.

This model recognised two broad categories of need.

<u>High Incidence Needs</u>

Schools received a General Allocation (GAM Hours) designed to support pupils with learning difficulties and high incidence special educational needs, including:

- Mild General Learning Disability

- Borderline Mild General Learning Disability
- Specific Learning Disability
- Literacy and numeracy difficulties
- Mild speech and language difficulties
- Mild emotional and behavioural difficulties
- ADHD, ADD and related learning needs.

This allocation recognised that every school would have pupils requiring additional support and enabled schools to provide intervention without requiring individual applications for every child.

Low Incidence Needs

Pupils presenting with more complex or enduring disabilities attracted individually sanctioned Resource Teaching hours following professional assessment.

Typical allocations included:

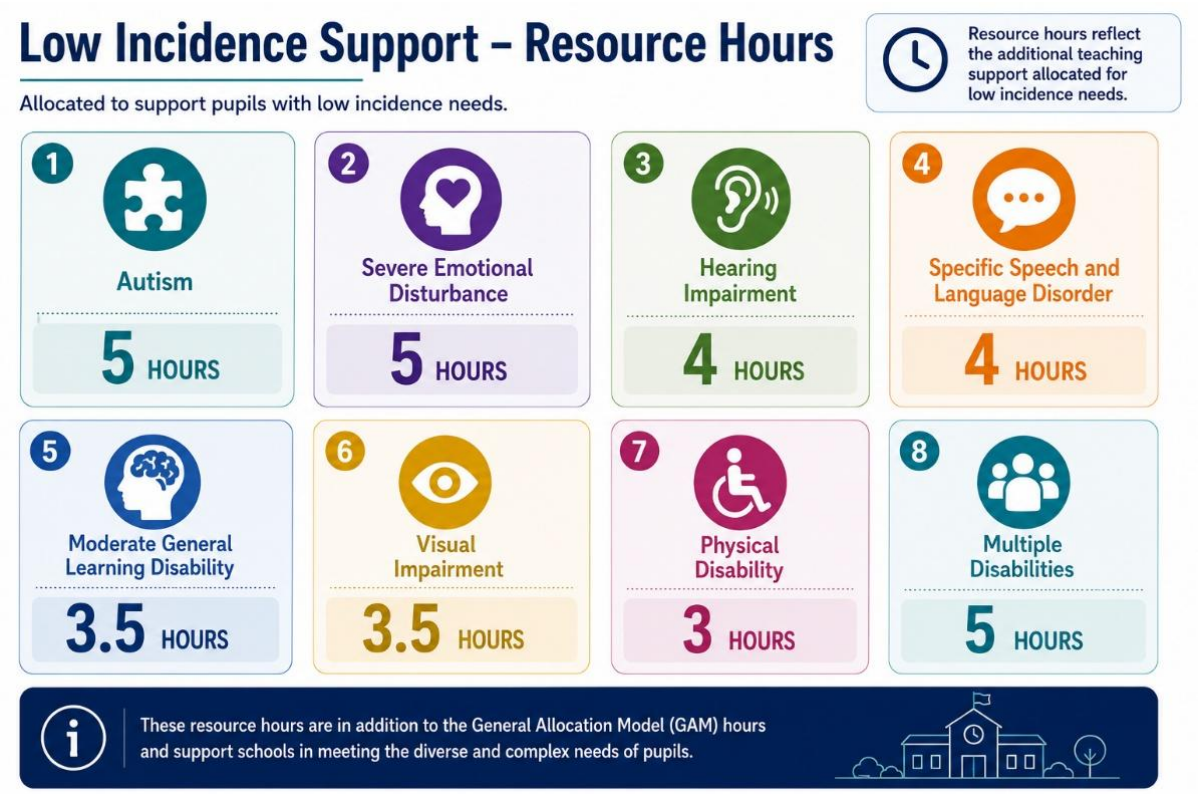


Figure 5: Under the previous allocation model, pupils presenting with low incidence disabilities attracted individually sanctioned teaching hours following professional assessment, providing the Department with direct visibility of identified educational need.

2.2 The Continuum of Support

Alongside these developments, NEPS later introduced the Continuum of Support, recognising that educational need exists along a spectrum rather than within fixed categories.

The Continuum promoted graduated intervention based upon children's response to support rather than solely upon diagnostic labels. Classroom Support, School Support and School Support Plus established a framework which remains central to good educational practice today.

The principles underpinning the Continuum remain central to good educational practice today.

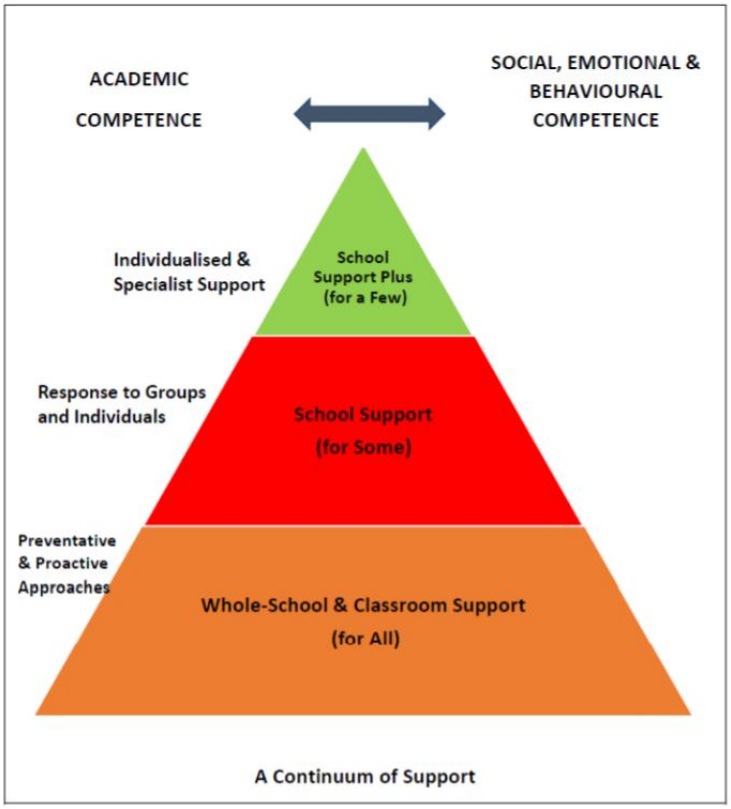


Figure 6: The Continuum of Support: Schools Already Identify, Plan, Monitor and Review Special Educational Need.

2.3 The 2017 Special Education Teacher (SET) Allocation Model

A fundamental policy change occurred in 2017 when Resource Teaching and Learning Support were replaced by a unified Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation.

The new model sought to achieve several important objectives:

- reduce dependence on medical diagnosis.
- enable earlier intervention.
- allocate resources more equitably.

- provide schools with greater autonomy and flexibility.
- reduce incentives for unnecessary assessment and labelling.

Rather than allocating teaching hours to individual pupils, each school received a single SET allocation calculated through an educational profile.

This profile was based primarily on:

- school enrolment.
- educational disadvantage.
- literacy and numeracy outcomes.
- a complex needs element informed by external health service data.

This represented a significant philosophical shift. Resources were no longer primarily linked to identified pupils. Instead, they became linked to statistical indicators intended to predict overall educational need within each school. The educational rationale underpinning this reform was sound.

However, it also represented a significant change in the information available to policymakers. Under the previous system, the Department could identify where individual pupils with complex educational needs were enrolled because those pupils generated specific allocations. Under the new model, allocations increasingly depended upon proxy indicators rather than the changing educational profile of individual schools.

2.4 The Emerging Experience: Growing Need, Static Capacity

At the same time as allocation methodology changed, schools experienced a profound change in the profile of pupils presenting with special education needs.

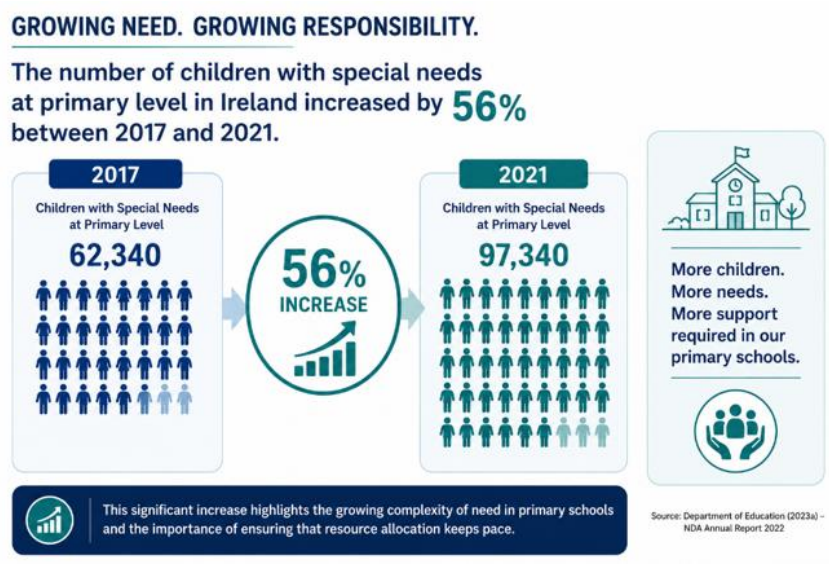


Figure 7: It is evident that the prevalence of SEN in our schools has increased and this statistic from the NDA Report 2022 reflects our lived experience in schools.

With no national database to capture or monitor this information, planning and securing supports and resources has become increasingly difficult in recent years.

Principals consistently report:

- significant increases in autism prevalence.
- growing numbers of pupils awaiting assessment.
- increasing complexity of communication, behavioural and emotional needs.
- greater demand for multidisciplinary supports.
- increasing numbers of pupils requiring School Support Plus interventions.

Yet despite these changes, many schools report that their annual SET allocations have remained largely unchanged for extended periods, being rolled forward with only modest adjustments despite substantial changes in pupil profile.

The consequence is a gradual reduction in effective capacity at school level. Schools are increasingly required to distribute largely static teaching allocations across substantially larger numbers of pupils with increasingly complex educational needs.

2.5 Needs Inflation: When Capacity Fails to Keep Pace

Many schools are experiencing what this submission describes as "needs inflation." This term does not refer to financial expenditure. Rather, it describes a situation in which the prevalence, diversity and complexity of special educational need within schools have increased significantly over time, while the capacity available to respond has not increased at the same rate.

As a result, schools are increasingly required to distribute relatively static Special Education Teacher allocations across a growing number of pupils with increasingly complex educational needs. This phenomenon differs from an explicit reduction in resources.

This distinction is important. The challenge facing schools is not necessarily one of reduced national investment. It is that growth in educational need has outpaced the responsiveness of the allocation model. The practical consequence is that the amount of specialist teaching time available relative to pupil need has progressively reduced. It is this gradual erosion of effective capacity that many principals have described as "cuts by stealth."

The term "needs inflation" is not intended to suggest a reduction in Government investment. Rather, it describes the cumulative effect of educational need increasing more rapidly than the responsiveness of the allocation model.

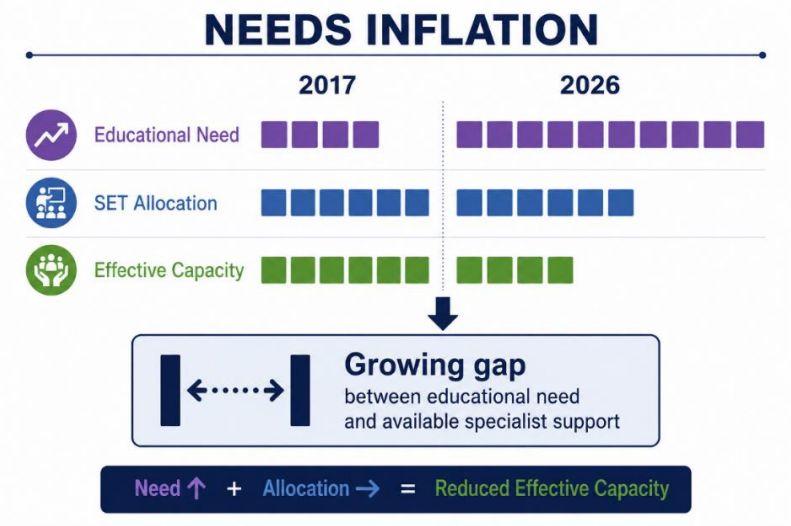


Figure 8: The National Principals' Forum describes this phenomenon as "needs inflation" - not a reduction in national investment, but a gradual erosion of effective capacity as educational need grows more rapidly than the responsiveness of the allocation system.

The experience of schools over recent years suggests that the challenge is no longer whether resources are invested, but whether the information underpinning allocation systems can keep pace with changing patterns of educational need. The 2024 review provides an important illustration of this challenge in practice.

2.6 The 2024 Review of the SET Allocation Model

The current Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation model distributes the national allocation of SET hours using three broad indicators. At system level, allocations are based on **25% enrolment**, **68.5% educational needs profile** and **6.5% educational disadvantage**. The educational needs component is informed primarily by schools' literacy and numeracy profiles, while the disadvantage component is derived from the Pobal HP Index together with enrolment data from the Primary Online Database (POD).

In 2024, the Department of Education reviewed the operation of the model and acknowledged that it would require ongoing development to respond to changing educational needs. The review introduced several important changes.

The gender weighting previously included within the model was removed following evidence that girls experience similar levels of educational need, although these needs may present differently and often emerge at a later stage.

More significantly, the **Complex Needs** component of the model was removed from future allocation calculations. The Department concluded that concerns regarding the consistency and reliability of data supplied through Children's Disability Network Teams meant that this element could no longer be used with confidence. While schools retained the hours already

allocated under this component, future allocations would instead redistribute those hours across the remaining pillars, increasing the weighting attached to literacy and numeracy indicators.

The review confirmed that these changes would not reduce the overall number of SET posts nationally. However, it also highlighted an important challenge. The principal mechanism within the allocation model intended to recognise increasing complexity of need had effectively ceased to operate because sufficiently robust national data was unavailable.

This is significant because it demonstrates that effective allocation depends upon accurate and reliable information.

The current model continues to provide a transparent and nationally consistent methodology for distributing finite resources. However, the experience of school leaders suggests that enrolment, educational attainment and disadvantage, while important indicators, cannot on their own capture the dynamic changes in special educational need that occur within schools over time. Consequently, allocations may remain broadly static despite significant changes in the prevalence and complexity of need between allocation cycles.

The next phase of inclusive education should build upon the strengths of the existing model rather than replace it. Complementing the current allocation methodology with secure, routinely updated school-level information on special educational need would strengthen the evidence base underpinning allocation decisions, improve responsiveness to changing need and enhance the long-term sustainability of Ireland's inclusive education system.

CHAPTER 3

The Information Gap: Why Accurate Information Matters



3.1 The Missing Data

This represents one of the most significant governance issues currently facing inclusive education. Schools possess detailed knowledge of the children requiring additional support.

Schools already maintain detailed information through School Provision Plans, Student Support Plans and the Continuum of Support. However, this information is not routinely collected through a national data system capable of informing future resource allocation.

Historically, schools were also able to indicate within the Primary Online Database (POD) when pupils were receiving low incidence teaching support or SNA support. These indicators are no longer available, meaning that the Department no longer has a comprehensive mechanism for capturing how school profiles evolve over time.

Similarly, while schools are required annually to notify the NCSE of pupils leaving the education system who have special education needs, there is no equivalent national process through which schools systematically report newly enrolled pupils with SEN or pupils whose needs emerge during their years in school.

Consequently, the education system possesses robust mechanisms for identifying children leaving provision but far less systematic information regarding children entering or developing special education needs.

This creates an incomplete picture of local and national educational need, as evidenced in both our case study and national research.

3.2 The Need for the Next Phase of Reform in Inclusive Education.

The National Principals' Forum is not advocating a return to diagnosis-led allocation. Nor does it question Ireland's commitment to inclusive education. Rather, we believe the next stage of reform should focus on strengthening the information upon which allocation decisions are made.

An inclusive education system cannot remain responsive if it lacks accurate, current and comprehensive information regarding the educational needs presenting within schools.

Investment has increased.

Commitment has increased.

Expectations have increased.

The information systems informing resource allocation must now evolve to the same standard. Without this evolution, there is a growing risk that allocation models become progressively disconnected from the operational realities experienced by schools.

The question facing policymakers is therefore no longer whether inclusion should be supported. It is whether the governance systems underpinning inclusion are sufficiently responsive to ensure that resources continue to follow need as that need changes over time.

Successful inclusion depends not only on a commitment to educate every child in their local school, but on maintaining a resource allocation system capable of recognising when the profile of need within that school has fundamentally changed.

Effective public policy depends upon accurate information.

Whether planning for healthcare, housing, transport or education, governments rely on information to understand current need, identify emerging trends and allocate finite resources fairly and transparently.

Inclusive education is no different.

Every decision relating to Special Education Teacher (SET) allocations, Special Needs Assistant (SNA) provision, school supports and future planning depends fundamentally upon an accurate understanding of the level, nature and distribution of special educational need across the school system.

3.3 Schools are Dynamic Environments

Schools are dynamic environments. New pupils enrol, educational needs emerge, diagnoses are received and support requirements change over time. Some pupils require increasing levels of intervention, while others become more independent. Effective planning therefore depends upon systems capable of recognising and responding to this continual change.

3.4 Visibility of Need

Throughout our engagement with school leaders, one concern has consistently emerged.

Principals increasingly question whether the education system possesses a sufficiently accurate picture of the actual profile of special educational need within their schools.

While schools continue to provide significant information to the Department of Education and the NCSE through multiple administrative returns, there is currently no comprehensive national mechanism through which schools can routinely record and update the changing profile of pupils presenting with identified special educational needs.

Historically, schools provided information relating to pupils associated with low incidence supports and Special Needs Assistant provision through central administrative systems (POD).

As allocation systems evolved, these mechanisms changed. This facility was removed entirely from POD after the introduction of the Continuum of Support Model and the SET model.

Today, schools continue to notify the system when pupils associated with historical allocations leave the school (the NCSE require principals to complete a 'Leavers Form' Annually). However, there is no equivalent mechanism through which schools can routinely notify the system when:

- pupils enrol with identified special educational needs.
- pupils receive a diagnosis during their time in school.
- pupils' needs become significantly more complex.
- patterns of need within the school change over time.

This creates a significant asymmetry in the information available to policymakers.

The system retains visibility of historical need leaving schools.

It has limited visibility of new need entering schools.

Schools are already entrusted with identifying pupils requiring additional support, implementing the Continuum of Support, developing Student Support Plans, monitoring progress, evaluating interventions and engaging with parents and external professionals. These responsibilities require schools to maintain detailed and continually updated knowledge of the educational needs within their school community.

The National Principals' Forum believes schools should also be trusted as partners in informing national planning by contributing accurate, current information regarding the changing profile of special educational need within their school.

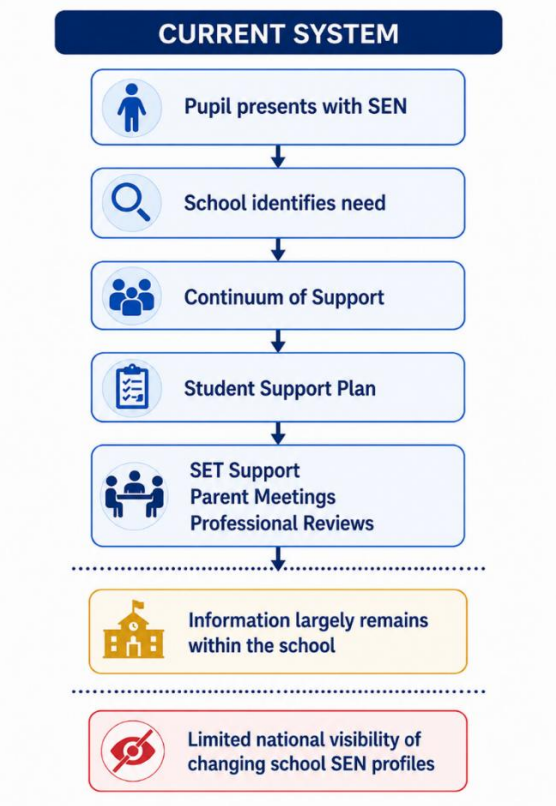


Figure 9: Current School-Based Process for Identifying and Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs. Schools routinely identify need, implement the Continuum of Support, develop Student Support Plans, monitor progress and review interventions. While this process generates detailed knowledge of pupils' changing educational needs, much of this information currently remains within the school and is not routinely available to inform national planning or resource allocation.

3.5 From Direct Measurement to Proxy Indicators

Current allocation arrangements rely principally on school profile indicators rather than direct measurement of each school's current SEN profile.

However, the model now relies principally upon school profile indicators, including enrolment, educational disadvantage and standardised test outcomes, rather than direct measurement of the current SEN profile within each school.

While these indicators undoubtedly provide valuable information, they are proxies for need. They cannot fully describe the complexity, diversity or changing nature of special educational need within individual schools. The SAT (Standardised Attainment Test) criterion gathers no information on pupils from junior infants to first class. Neither does it account for SEN that are not captured by these tests, such as certain profiles of ASD, EBD, etc.

Consequently, many school leaders question whether current allocation models possess sufficient sensitivity to respond to changing patterns of educational need over time.

3.6 The Operational Consequences

The absence of comprehensive, dynamic school-level SEN information has practical consequences.

- It reduces confidence that allocations accurately reflect current need.
- It limits policymakers' ability to identify emerging trends.
- It makes long-term planning more difficult.
- It places greater reliance upon appeals processes once schools experience significant pressure.
- It also contributes to increasing frustration among school leaders who experience a disconnect between the reality of need within their schools and the resources available to respond.

This is not an argument for returning to diagnosis-led allocation. It is an argument that those responsible for allocating resources should have access to the most accurate and current information available.

In the past it was identified that the HSE did not have comprehensive SEN information, and so ‘complex needs’ could not be reliably identified from their data. SET allocation metrics were then changed to reflect this – which schools and parents vehemently opposed its removal of complex needs as a criterion.

This has created a disconnect between what schools know and what the system can routinely use. For many principals, the challenge is not a lack of information, but the absence of any systematic mechanism through which that information can contribute to planning and resource allocation.

3.7 Evidence from School Leaders

The National Principals' Forum surveyed 225 primary schools in June 2026 (Appendix 1). The findings, discussed further in Chapter 5, demonstrate widespread support for the development of a secure national mechanism through which schools could routinely record and update SEN profile information.

An overwhelming majority of school leaders supported the introduction of a secure national mechanism allowing schools to record and update SEN profile information through the Primary Online Database (POD), or an equivalent national platform.

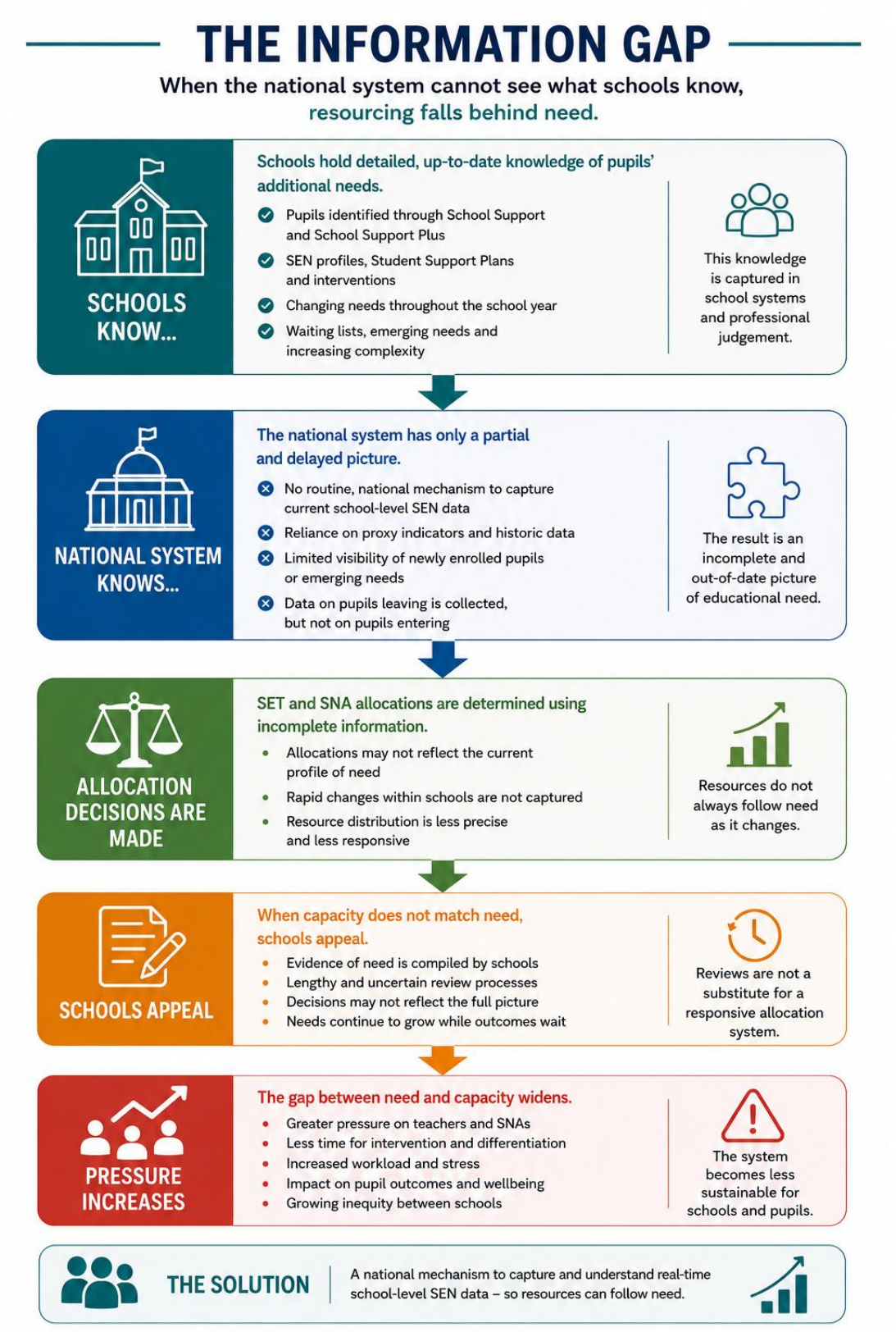


Figure 10: The Information Gap: Schools Know More Than the System Can Currently See. Schools routinely identify, assess, plan for and monitor pupils with special educational needs through the Continuum of Support. However, much of this detailed and continually evolving information is not routinely captured within the national systems used to inform policy, planning and resource allocation.

3.8 Looking Forward

Ireland has made considerable progress in advancing inclusive education.

The next stage of that journey requires governance systems that are equally progressive.

As policy aspirations become more ambitious, the quality of the information underpinning planning becomes increasingly important.

The National Principals' Forum submits that the development of a dynamic, secure and nationally consistent mechanism through which schools can record and update the profile of special educational need within their school would strengthen educational planning, improve confidence in resource allocation and better support the long-term sustainability of inclusive education.

The issue is therefore not whether schools possess information. The issue is whether the education system makes effective use of the information schools already hold.

Every allocation system is only as effective as the information upon which it is based. Ireland has made significant progress in building an inclusive education system. The next stage of that journey is to ensure that the evidence informing policy is as dynamic and responsive as the schools implementing it every day.

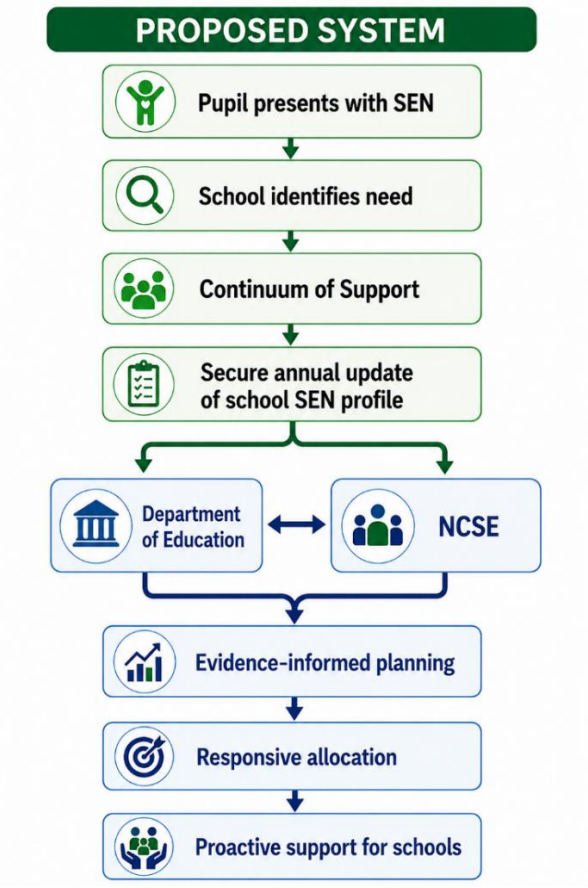


Figure 11: Schools already identify, monitor and review pupils requiring additional support. The National Principals' Forum proposes that this information should be gathered to inform both local and national planning.

CHAPTER 4

Operational Consequences: When System Capacity Falls Behind Need



The preceding chapters have examined the evolution of inclusive education and identified the information gap at the heart of the current system. This chapter explores the practical consequences for schools when governance, planning and system capacity do not keep pace with changing patterns of pupil need. The challenges described are not isolated operational issues; they are interconnected consequences of wider systemic pressures that increasingly shape the day-to-day delivery of inclusive education.

4.1 The Growing Gap Between Need and Allocation

One of the most consistent concerns expressed by school leaders is the widening gap between the level and complexity of educational need presenting within schools and the resources available to respond.

Many principals report that Special Education Teacher (SET) allocations have remained largely unchanged over a number of years despite significant changes in school enrolment, increasing prevalence of autism, growing numbers of pupils awaiting assessment, increasing complexity of need and changing demographic profiles.

While annual allocation reviews take place, principals frequently describe allocations as being effectively rolled forward, with limited responsiveness to significant changes occurring within individual schools.

Many principals describe this as a gradual erosion of effective capacity. Existing allocations are required to support an increasing number of pupils presenting with increasingly diverse and complex educational needs. Consequently, specialist teaching time must be distributed more thinly across a growing cohort of pupils, requiring difficult decisions regarding prioritisation and intensity of intervention.

The issue is not that every increase in need should automatically generate additional resources. It is whether allocation systems remain sufficiently responsive to recognise significant and sustained changes in school need over time.

The central question is therefore not whether resources should increase indefinitely, but whether current allocation mechanisms remain sufficiently responsive to ensure that resources continue to follow need as that need evolves.

4.2 Exceptional Review and Appeals Processes

Where schools believe that Special Education Teacher or Special Needs Assistant allocations no longer reflect the profile of need within their school, they may apply through exceptional review and appeals processes. These mechanisms are an important safeguard within the current system and provide an opportunity for schools to seek additional support where circumstances have changed significantly.

However, feedback from practising school leaders suggests that these processes are increasingly functioning as a response to systemic pressure rather than as an effective mechanism for recognising changing educational need.

Table 4: Outcome of SNA Exceptional Review Appeals processed by for the 2022/23 school year

No of Appeals	Outcome as of Dec 2022
61	Not Upheld
1	Being processed
16	Upheld
78	Total

Figure 12: Taken directly from the NCSE Annual Report 2022, showing a 20.1% success rate for appellants of SNA Exceptional Review Process for the 2022/2023 school year.

"Schools continue to have access to a review of their SET allocation in light of exceptional circumstances. 362 schools applied for an exceptional review during the calendar year. Of those, 60 were put forward for review, of which 39 schools were allocated an increase in SET Hours" – NCSE Annual Report 2022.

"

Figure 13: Taken directly from the NCSE Annual Report 2022, showing a 10.7% success rate for appellants of SET Exceptional Review Process for the 2022/2023 school year. 83.4% of schools that applied for a review did not make it past the initial application phase to be reviewed.

Many principals report submitting extensive evidence demonstrating increasing complexity of need yet receiving little or no adjustment to existing allocations. Similar concerns have been expressed regarding the outcomes of Special Needs Assistant exceptional reviews.

This places school leaders in the difficult position of repeatedly evidencing need while continuing to support pupils whose educational requirements remain unchanged irrespective of the outcome of an appeal. The administrative burden associated with preparing detailed applications also diverts valuable leadership time away from supporting teaching and learning.

The Committee may therefore wish to consider whether the current review mechanisms are sufficiently responsive to recognise significant changes in pupil need between allocation cycles, or whether greater emphasis should be placed on proactive allocation informed by accurate, current school-level information rather than reactive appeals once schools have reached capacity.

4.3 Special Classes: Capacity Beyond the Classroom

The expansion of Special Classes represents one of the most significant developments in Irish inclusive education over the past decade. The National Principals' Forum welcomes the commitment shown by Government in increasing the number of Special Classes and the opportunities this has created for many children to attend their local schools.

However, establishing a Special Class involves considerably more than sanctioning a classroom and staffing allocation.

Successful inclusion depends upon the capacity of the whole school. Principals must recruit and support appropriately qualified staff, adapt accommodation, coordinate specialist services, develop whole-school expertise and ensure that pupils attending Special Classes are fully included in the life of the school.

Where wider school capacity is already under significant pressure, these responsibilities become increasingly difficult. Static SET allocations, growing mainstream need and limited access to external supports can reduce the flexibility schools require to support meaningful inclusion across the entire school community.

The relationship between Special Classes and mainstream provision is particularly important. Successful inclusion depends not only on the quality of provision within the Special Class itself, but also on the capacity of mainstream classrooms to support integration, shared learning opportunities and participation in wider school life. Where mainstream supports are stretched, opportunities for meaningful inclusion may become more difficult to sustain.

The National Principals' Forum believes that future planning for Special Classes should therefore be accompanied by parallel investment in whole-school capacity, ensuring that staffing, leadership, accommodation, specialist supports and mainstream provision develop together.

4.4 The Burden of Waiting Lists

One of the strongest themes emerging from both previous National Principals' Forum reports and our most recent survey concerns delays in accessing external assessments and therapeutic services.

Primary schools increasingly support children whose educational needs have been identified, but who are still awaiting assessment, diagnosis or specialist intervention. As a result, schools are often required to respond to significant levels of need long before external services become available.

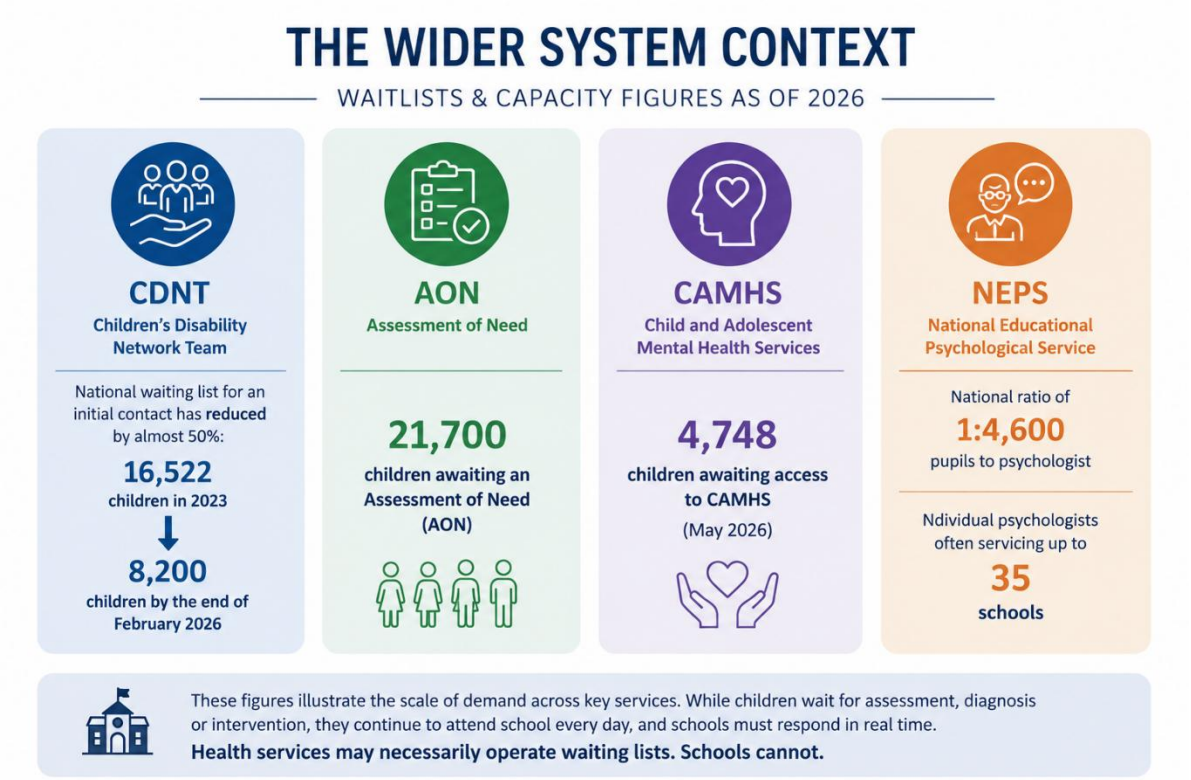


Figure 14: The Wider System Context: Key national indicators illustrating the demand for disability, psychological and mental health services in 2026. These figures provide important context for understanding the operational realities currently experienced by schools delivering inclusive education.

These figures provide important context for understanding the operational realities facing schools. While children wait for assessment, diagnosis or therapeutic intervention, they continue to attend school every day. Principals, teachers and Special Needs Assistants must respond immediately to their needs by adapting teaching, implementing supports, managing increasingly complex situations and working closely with families, often without timely access to the specialist advice or interventions that would ordinarily inform this work.

These figures are not presented as a criticism of health, disability or psychological services, many of which are themselves operating under significant capacity pressures. Rather, they illustrate the wider system context within which schools are expected to deliver inclusive education.

Health services may necessarily operate waiting lists. Schools cannot.

Children require support from the day they arrive in school. When specialist services are delayed, the responsibility for meeting those needs does not pause - it is absorbed by schools. This places significant pressure on principals, teachers and Special Needs Assistants, who must continue to provide safe, appropriate and inclusive educational environments while awaiting the wider supports upon which many children depend.

4.5 The Principal as System Coordinator

The role of the principal has evolved significantly alongside inclusive education.

School leaders now coordinate a complex network involving parents, Special Education Teachers, Special Needs Assistants, NCSE staff, NEPS psychologists, Children's Disability Network Teams, Primary Care Services, CAMHS, Tusla, transport providers and numerous other professionals.

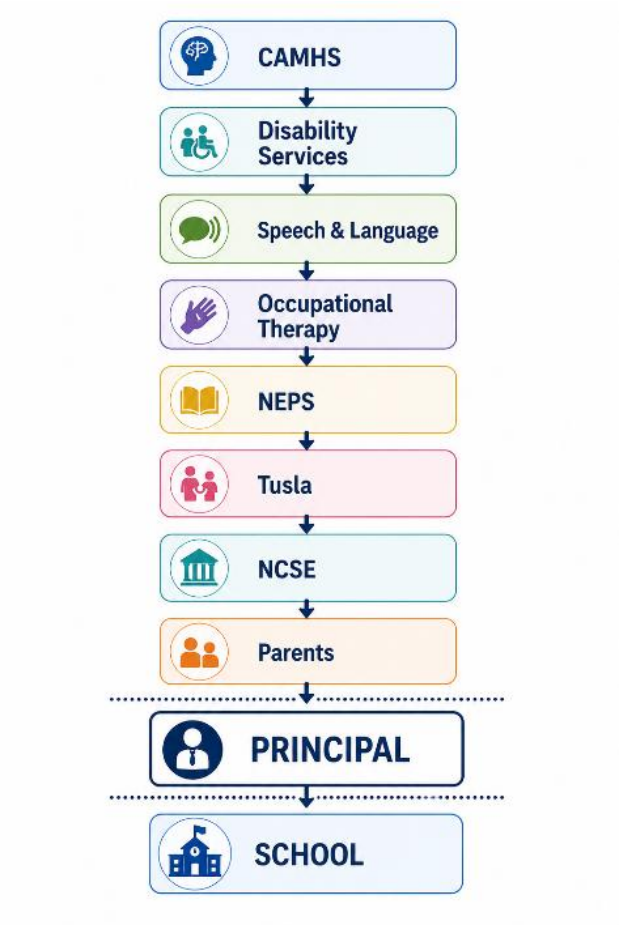


Figure 15: While each agency has defined responsibilities, coordination frequently rests with the school principal.

While each agency has defined responsibilities, no single agency coordinates the interaction between them. That responsibility frequently rests with the school principal.

Increasingly, school leaders find themselves organising multidisciplinary meetings, managing competing professional recommendations, supporting families navigating multiple services and ensuring that educational provision continues despite delays elsewhere within the system.

These responsibilities require significant expertise and considerable time. Yet they are rarely recognised explicitly within allocation or leadership support structures. This is heavily impacting all school leaders and is particularly difficult for teaching principals who have full teaching responsibilities in tandem with an ever increasing administrative and leadership workload.

4.6 Workforce Capacity: Professional Learning and Specialist Expertise

The successful implementation of inclusive education depends not only upon the allocation of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), but upon ensuring that the entire school workforce possesses the knowledge, confidence and professional expertise required to respond to increasingly diverse pupil needs.

School leaders consistently report that the profile of need within mainstream classrooms has changed significantly over the past decade. Teachers are now supporting increasing numbers of pupils presenting with autism, communication needs, emotional regulation difficulties, complex behaviours, trauma-related needs, sensory processing differences and significant mental health challenges. Many teachers report that initial teacher education did not fully prepare them for the realities of today's increasingly complex inclusive classrooms.

Ongoing professional learning remains equally important. However, opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are often fragmented, dependent on local availability and difficult to access within the school year. Many courses take place outside normal working hours and at the educator's own expense, while the removal of qualification allowances has reduced incentives for teachers to pursue postgraduate study in special educational needs despite the significant financial and time commitment involved.

The role of the Special Education Teacher has also evolved considerably. SETs are expected not only to deliver evidence-informed interventions, but increasingly to advise colleagues, coordinate support planning, interpret assessment information, liaise with external professionals and contribute to whole-school approaches to inclusion. These responsibilities require highly specialised knowledge supported by ongoing professional learning.

Similarly, the role of the Special Needs Assistant continues to evolve. SNAs increasingly support pupils with complex medical, behavioural, communication and personal care needs within highly inclusive school environments. As their responsibilities become more complex, opportunities for structured induction, professional learning and ongoing support must develop accordingly. Recent changes limiting SNA involvement in certain secondary care needs have also reduced the flexibility available to schools to support some pupils whose care requirements remain significant.

Strengthening workforce capacity should therefore be regarded as a strategic component of inclusive education rather than an optional enhancement. Investment in staffing alone cannot deliver successful inclusion if staff are not provided with the knowledge, confidence, protected time and professional support required to meet increasingly complex educational needs.

A coherent national workforce strategy should encompass initial teacher education, structured induction, ongoing professional learning and leadership development for teachers, SETs, SNAs and school leaders. It should also recognise the operational realities of schools by providing sufficient release time and substitute cover to enable meaningful participation in professional learning.

Ultimately, an inclusive education system cannot rely on specialist staff alone. Every classroom must be an inclusive classroom, and every teacher should be equipped, supported and confident in meeting the diverse needs of the pupils they teach. Whole-school approaches, including

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), should therefore become an increasingly central feature of both initial education and continuing professional development.

An inclusive education system cannot rely on specialist staff alone. Every classroom must be an inclusive classroom, and every teacher should be equipped, supported and confident in meeting the diverse needs of the pupils they teach. Strengthening workforce capacity is not separate from strengthening inclusive education. It is one of its essential foundations.



Figure 16: CPD (Continuous Professional Development) and Training areas were prioritised by Principals in NPF SEN Survey June 2026

4.7 Funding and Operational Sustainability

The National Principals' Forum welcomes the Government's continued investment in education and acknowledges the significant increase in funding for special education in recent years.

However, school leaders consistently report that current funding arrangements do not fully reflect the operational realities of delivering inclusive education.

Supporting children with special education needs extends beyond staffing allocations. Schools incur significant ongoing costs associated with specialist teaching resources, assistive technology, sensory equipment, environmental adaptations, specialised educational materials, staff training, substitute cover and the increasing administrative demands associated with coordinating inclusive education.

Boards of Management also regularly fund essential training, including People Moving and Handling, medical procedures and crisis intervention, to ensure schools can meet their statutory duty of care to both pupils and staff. In many cases, these costs are absorbed within already stretched general school budgets because dedicated funding is unavailable or insufficient.

Consequently, many schools continue to rely on fundraising and locally generated income to sustain important aspects of inclusive provision. While school communities consistently demonstrate remarkable generosity and commitment, reliance on voluntary fundraising to support core elements of inclusive education raises important questions regarding equity, consistency and long-term sustainability.

A sustainable inclusive education system should ensure that schools are appropriately resourced not only to employ staff, but also to meet the wider operational costs associated with supporting children with special education needs. Doing so would enable school leaders to focus their time and resources on educational leadership rather than continually addressing operational funding shortfalls.

4.8 Summer Programme Delivery

The National Summer Programme provides valuable educational opportunities for many children and important support for families during school holidays, and schools broadly support the objectives of the programme and recognise its positive contribution to inclusive education.

However, the experience of delivering the programme illustrates a broader challenge identified throughout this submission: successful policy implementation depends not only on good policy design, but also on the operational capacity of schools to deliver it.

Recent changes to programme arrangements, together with evolving eligibility criteria, recruitment difficulties, staffing shortages and increasing administrative requirements, have made delivery progressively more challenging for many schools. These demands are often placed upon school leaders who are already managing increasingly complex responsibilities associated with inclusive education during the academic year.

The Summer Programme demonstrates an important principle. The success of any educational initiative depends upon ensuring that schools have the workforce capacity, administrative support, clear operational guidance and realistic implementation timelines necessary to deliver it effectively.

This lesson extends beyond the Summer Programme. As Ireland continues to strengthen inclusive education, implementation capacity should be recognised as an integral component of policy development rather than an operational consideration addressed after policy decisions have been made.

4.9 International Perspective: Lessons from New Brunswick

The challenges associated with implementing inclusive education are not unique to Ireland. International experience demonstrates that while the principles of inclusion are widely supported, sustaining inclusive education requires governance systems, workforce capacity and resources to evolve alongside policy ambition.

As part of its work examining international approaches to inclusion, the National Principals' Forum engaged with representatives of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) in Canada regarding the implementation of New Brunswick's Total Inclusion Policy (Policy 322), introduced in 2013.

The NBTA reaffirmed its strong support for the principle of inclusive education. However, it advised that the policy now requires significant revision because *"the difference between the policy commitments and the resources provided to support these is very significant."* The Association further observed that, while the policy *"sounds great on paper, the reality is far different"* and described its implementation as *"enormously complex to apply and expensive to support."* Revising the policy has since become one of the profession's principal priorities.

New Brunswick Teachers' Association Feedback on their Inclusive Education Model

"The difference between the policy commitments and the resources provided to support these is very significant."

"It sounds great on paper, but the reality is far different."

"It is enormously complex to apply and expensive to support."

While Ireland and New Brunswick operate different education systems, the experience offers an important lesson. The long-term success of inclusive education depends not only on policy ambition, but on ensuring that the governance systems supporting it remain responsive as pupil needs evolve. Accurate information, responsive resource allocation, workforce capacity, specialist supports and effective interagency collaboration are not supplementary to inclusion - they are the essential conditions that enable it to succeed.

Ireland has the opportunity to strengthen these systems before similar pressures become further embedded. This represents the next phase in the evolution of inclusive education: not revisiting the principle of inclusion but ensuring that the governance structures supporting it continue to evolve alongside the schools responsible for delivering it every day.

4.10 The Evidence from Schools

The issues identified throughout this submission are not isolated experiences or the concerns of individual schools. They are consistently reflected in the experiences of school leaders across the country.

To inform this submission, the National Principals' Forum surveyed 225 primary school principals in June 2026 (Chapter 5 & Appendix 1). The findings reinforce themes that have emerged repeatedly through previous NPF surveys, submissions and engagement with school leaders since 2018 [Available to view on our website www.principalsforum.org]

Across successive surveys, principals consistently report:

- increasing prevalence and complexity of special educational need.
- Special Education Teacher allocations that do not fully reflect current levels of need.
- growing administrative and leadership demands associated with inclusive education.
- significant delays in accessing assessments and therapeutic supports.
- limited confidence that current allocation systems accurately reflect the changing profile of need within schools; and
- increasing concern regarding the long-term sustainability of current arrangements.

The findings presented throughout this submission therefore point to a clear conclusion. The challenge facing inclusive education is not one of commitment within schools. Rather, it is ensuring that the governance systems surrounding schools—including information, resource allocation, interagency collaboration, workforce capacity and operational supports—continue to evolve in line with the increasingly complex needs of pupils.

Strengthening these systems will support school leaders while improving educational experiences and outcomes for children.

CHAPTER 5

Evidence from the Front Line

Throughout this submission, the National Principals' Forum has examined the structural and operational challenges affecting the delivery of inclusive education in primary schools. To inform this submission and following the invitation to appear before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth, the National Principals' Forum surveyed primary school principals nationwide to determine whether these concerns reflected isolated experiences or wider patterns across the education system (Appendix 1).

The findings reveal a remarkable degree of consistency. School leaders remain unequivocally committed to inclusive education. However, they consistently report that the systems supporting inclusion are no longer keeping pace with the changing prevalence, complexity and diversity of need within schools.

These findings reinforce those identified in previous National Principals' Forum research, demonstrating that many of these issues have persisted over a number of years despite continued policy commitment and investment.

Survey Overview

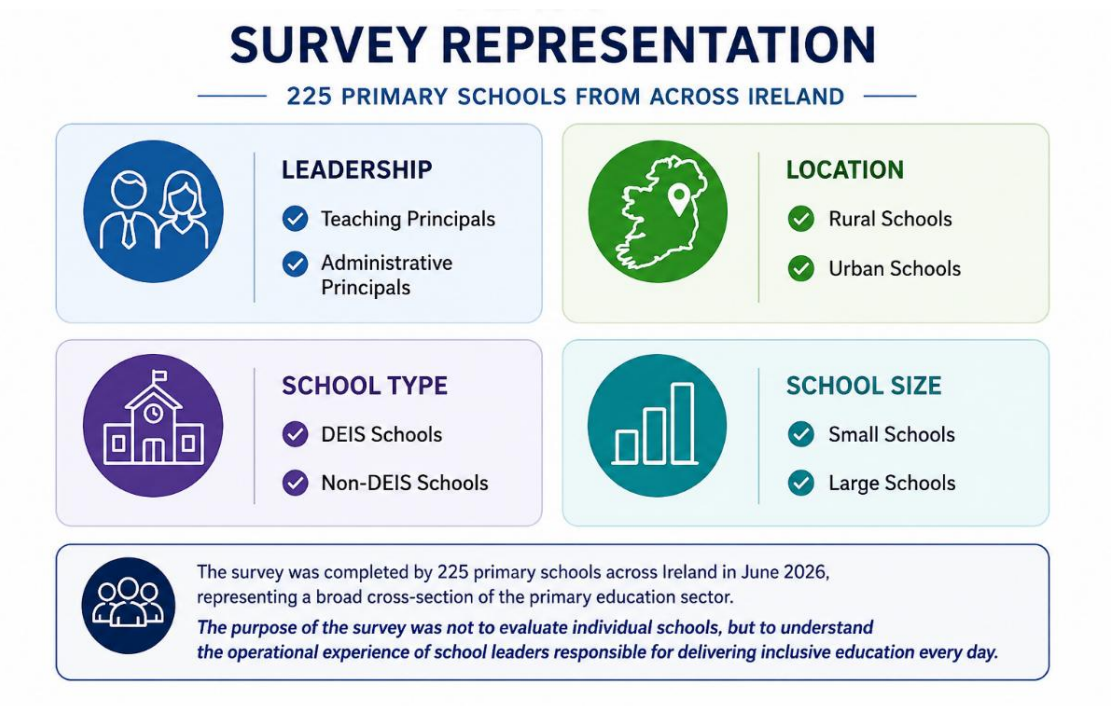


Figure 17: June 2026 Survey Representation

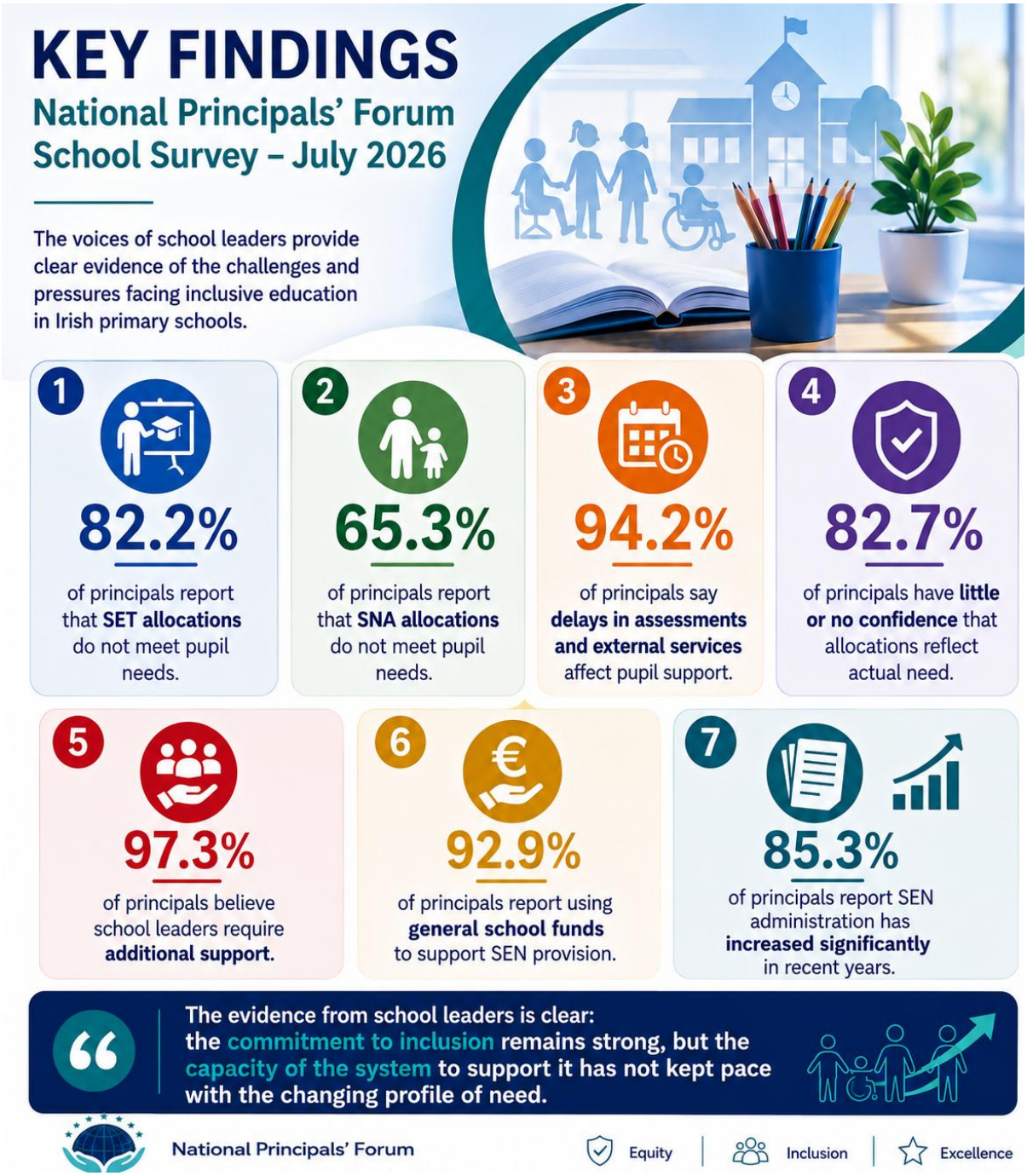


Figure 18: Policy in Action - The Lived Experience of practising School Principals

Key Finding 1: Current SET allocations are not keeping pace with need.

The most significant finding relates to Special Education Teacher allocation.

82.2% of responding principals reported that their current SET allocation does not adequately meet the needs of pupils in their school.

In addition, a substantial majority reported that they regularly make difficult decisions regarding the prioritisation of finite teaching hours across increasing levels of need.

Key Finding 2: Schools have little confidence in current information systems.

Perhaps the most significant governance finding relates to confidence in the information informing national planning.

A vast majority of principals indicated that they do not believe the current system possesses an accurate picture of the special educational needs profile within their school.

Equally significant, an overwhelming majority supported the introduction of a secure mechanism through which schools could routinely record and update SEN profile information through POD, or an equivalent national platform.

These findings provide strong support for one of the central propositions of this submission: effective planning and equitable allocation depend upon accurate, current and school-informed information.

Key Finding 3: Waiting lists are transferring pressure to schools.

Almost every responding principal reported that delays in external assessment and therapeutic services are affecting their school's ability to support pupils.

Schools described significant delays in accessing psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, behavioural supports and other specialist services.

These findings demonstrate that schools increasingly manage the educational consequences of wider system capacity pressures.

The survey reinforces a central reality identified throughout this submission:

Health services may necessarily operate waiting lists - Schools cannot.

Children require support from the day they arrive in school, whether the school has the capacity to do so safely or not.

Responsibility for supporting children frequently transfers to schools before the wider system can respond, reinforcing the importance of timely assessment, coordinated services and sufficient school capacity.

Key Finding 4: The leadership role has fundamentally changed.

An overwhelming majority of principals reported that the administration and coordination associated with inclusive education has increased significantly over recent years.

Many respondents reported spending substantial proportions of their working week coordinating meetings, documentation, applications, reviews, interagency communication and family engagement associated with special educational provision.

The survey findings suggest that the role of the principal has evolved far beyond traditional educational leadership.

School leaders increasingly act as coordinators of complex multidisciplinary systems.

The findings suggest that the role of the principal has evolved beyond traditional educational leadership to encompass the coordination of increasingly complex multidisciplinary systems of support.

Key Finding 5: Schools continue to experience funding pressures.

Respondents consistently reported that current funding arrangements do not fully reflect the operational costs associated with delivering inclusive education.

Many principals reported using school-generated income and fundraising to supplement expenditure relating to inclusive practice, specialised resources, environmental adaptations and additional operational requirements.

Many principals expressed concern regarding the sustainability of relying on locally generated income to support essential elements of inclusive provision.

Key Finding 6: Professional learning remains an important priority.

Respondents identified continuing demand for high-quality professional learning across a range of areas, including autism, communication, emotional regulation, behaviour support, trauma-informed practice and leadership of inclusive schools.

Principals consistently recognised the professionalism and commitment of teachers and Special Needs Assistants while also acknowledging the increasing complexity of need now presenting within classrooms.

Ongoing professional learning was viewed as essential to maintaining workforce capacity and quality within inclusive education.

What the Survey Tells Us

What the Survey Tells Us

Viewed individually, each finding highlights an important aspect of current school experience. Viewed collectively, they present a clear and consistent picture. School leaders remain firmly committed to inclusive education but report a widening gap between the increasing complexity of pupil need and the capacity of current systems to respond effectively. This gap is evident in Special Education Teacher allocations, access to external services, the quality of information informing national planning, funding arrangements, workforce capacity and the growing coordination responsibilities placed on school leaders.

Importantly, these findings closely reflect the concerns identified in previous National Principals' Forum research, ongoing engagement with school leaders and the experiences of the 849 schools that supported the National Principals' Forum petition submitted in advance of this Committee hearing. Together, they demonstrate that the challenges outlined throughout this submission are neither isolated nor recent but represent a consistent and widely shared experience across primary schools.

The survey does not suggest that schools are resistant to inclusion. Rather, it demonstrates an enduring commitment to ensuring that every child is welcomed, supported and enabled to participate fully in school life. It also suggests that the systems underpinning inclusive education now require further development if they are to remain responsive, sustainable and capable of meeting the evolving needs of pupils.

CHAPTER 6

Case Study: When System Design Meets School Reality

While national statistics help explain system-level trends, individual case studies demonstrate how those trends are experienced in practice.

The following case study illustrates how one primary school's profile of need differs significantly from the information currently visible within the national allocation system.

While it focuses on a mainstream primary school with special classes, many of the issues described are also experienced in other educational settings.

The particular challenges facing special schools warrant separate consideration and fall outside the scope of this submission.

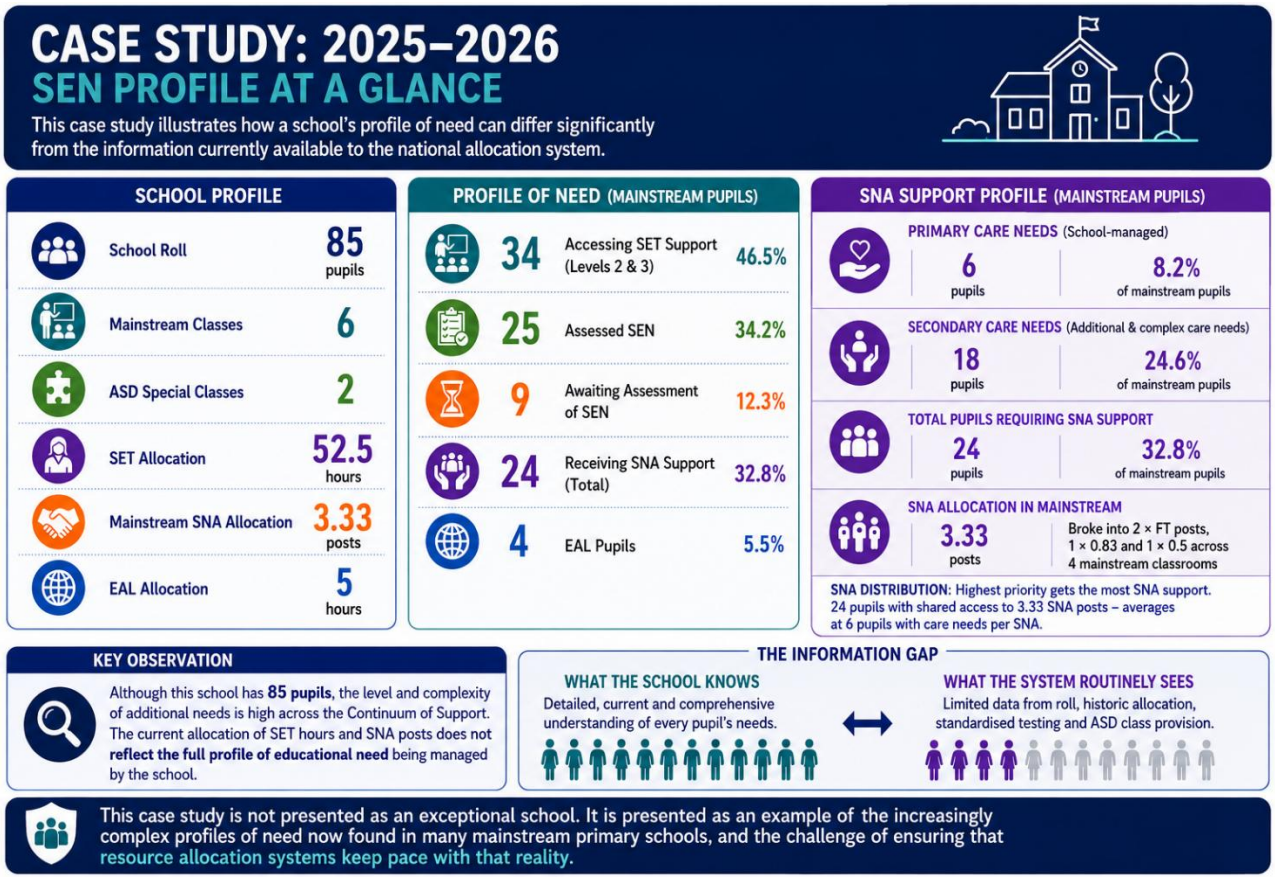


Figure 19: School SEN Profile Information

6.1 School Context

This primary school is a co-educational, vertical school in a rural setting in Munster. It has four mainstream classrooms, two ASD classrooms (opened 2013 & 2014) and two SET teachers.

The school has experienced stable enrolment for more than 15 years, allowing changes in pupil need to be considered independently of significant fluctuations in pupil numbers.

6.2 The Changing Profile of Need

The profile of need in this school has changed significantly within this timeframe, despite relatively stable enrolment.

Like many schools across Ireland, increasing numbers of pupils now present with:

- Autism
- Speech and language needs
- Social, emotional and behavioural needs
- Complex learning needs
- Complex medical needs
- Physical disabilities
- Pupils awaiting assessment.
- Pupils requiring significant educational support despite the absence of formal diagnosis.

The school has fully embraced inclusive education and has continually adapted its practices to meet these changing needs.

However, while need has evolved significantly, available resources have not increased at the same pace.

6.3 The SET Allocation

The school's current Special Education Teacher allocation reflects the operation of the existing allocation model.

Despite increasing complexity of need and changing pupil demographics, the allocation has remained largely static over successive allocation cycles, standing at 52.5 hours for almost the past decade.

Analysis undertaken by the school indicates that approximately **33.5 additional SET hours** would be required to meet the identified educational needs of pupils currently attending the school, excluding pupils awaiting assessment. See Appendix 2 for a thorough breakdown of SEN information.

This shortfall has developed gradually through the cumulative effect of increasing complexity of need, demographic change, additional pupils requiring support, relatively static allocations and limited responsiveness within existing review mechanisms.

During an SET allocation review, the school was advised in 2019 that its profile of need appeared atypical. The school believes it experienced demographic changes earlier than perhaps some other schools following the establishment of two special classes in 2013 and 2014 respectively. The profile now observed within this school increasingly reflects patterns reported by schools nationally, with significant and growing levels of special education need presenting across the school.

Additionally, with the introduction of SET Allocation changes in 2024, the schools existing allocation of 55 hours was inexplicably cut by 2.5 hours. This resulted in an existing SET cluster with a neighbouring school in the twin parish being broken, and these 2.5 hours had to be outsourced to a school over 30mins away from this school.

Many principals describe this gradual erosion of effective capacity as "cuts by stealth"—not through explicit reductions in allocation, but because educational need increases while allocations remain largely static.

6.4 Operational Consequences

The practical consequences are significant.

The school must continually prioritise finite teaching hours between pupils whose educational needs all warrant support.

This results in difficult professional decisions regarding:

- frequency of intervention.
- duration of support.
- prioritisation of pupils.
- balancing literacy, numeracy, communication and social-emotional needs.
- responding to emerging needs throughout the school year.

School leaders frequently describe this as attempting to multiply finite resources across continually increasing demand.

6.5 Appeals and Review

Recognising the growing disparity between need and allocation, the school sought review through the available processes.

Despite presenting evidence of increasing complexity and changing pupil profiles, additional allocation was not secured.

This raises a wider policy question: if schools experiencing demonstrable increases in need cannot secure additional capacity through existing review mechanisms, how does the system respond to changing educational realities?

6.6 The Missing Data

Perhaps the most significant issue arising from this case study concerns information. The school possesses detailed and continually updated information regarding the educational profile of its pupils, including diagnoses, pupils awaiting assessment and changing levels of need over time. Yet there is currently no comprehensive national mechanism through which this evolving profile can be routinely recorded, integrated into national planning and used to inform resource allocation. Consequently, a disconnect remains between what schools know and what the national system can routinely see.

This disconnect between school-level knowledge and national visibility lies at the heart of many of the challenges explored throughout this submission.

6.7 When School Capacity Reaches Its Limits

The school has also experienced significant challenges in safely supporting pupils with exceptionally complex needs.

In one recent case, despite extensive interventions, sustained engagement with external agencies and every reasonable effort to support the pupil within the school setting, the Board of Management ultimately concluded that it could no longer safely meet the pupil's needs. The difficult decision was taken to expel the pupil as a safeguarding measure of last resort, having exhausted all available alternatives. The decision was profoundly distressing for the child, their family and the entire school community.

Following an appeal under Section 29 of the Education Act, the Appeals Committee upheld the Board's decision, recognising the comprehensive and sustained efforts made by the school to support the pupil prior to reaching this point.

This case is not presented as evidence against inclusive education. Rather, it illustrates the consequences that can arise when schools are expected to meet exceptionally complex needs without timely access to specialist supports, therapeutic intervention and sufficient system capacity. No child, family or school should find themselves in such a position.

Inclusive education must be underpinned by the capacity to ensure that every child can be educated safely, appropriately and successfully. Where that capacity is absent, schools may be left making decisions that no child, family, principal or Board of Management should ever have to face.

6.8 A Wider Pattern

This case study is not presented as evidence in isolation. Its significance lies in its consistency with wider findings.

The concerns illustrated here are reflected in:

- the National Principals' Forum survey of 225 schools in June 2026.
- the support of 849 primary schools through the National Principals' Forum petition.
- previous National Principals' Forum reports dating back a number of years.
- ongoing engagement with principals throughout the country.

The significance of this case study lies not in the experience of one school, but in the extent to which it reflects patterns consistently reported by schools across Ireland.

6.9 Lessons for Policy

This case study demonstrates that the future of inclusive education is no longer determined solely by educational philosophy. It is increasingly determined by the effectiveness of the systems that support schools in translating policy into practice.

The experience of this school illustrates many of the themes identified throughout this submission: changing patterns of need, relatively static allocations, limited national visibility of school-level SEN profiles, increasing reliance on school leadership, and growing dependence on the professionalism and commitment of staff to bridge the gap between policy ambition and operational capacity.

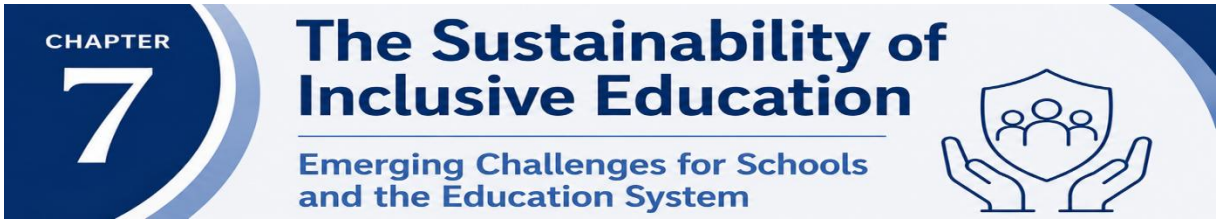
The school is not presented as an exceptional case. Rather, it illustrates the experience of many schools that have adapted successfully to increasingly diverse pupil needs while operating within systems that have not evolved at the same pace.

The next phase of inclusive education should therefore focus on strengthening the governance structures that support schools. Better information, more responsive allocation, stronger interagency collaboration, sustained investment in workforce capacity and effective leadership support will help ensure that inclusive education remains both ambitious and sustainable.

Ultimately, this case study demonstrates a central proposition of this submission:

Schools have adapted to inclusion.

The systems supporting schools must now continue to adapt alongside them.



The case study presented in Chapter 6 is not intended to portray an exceptional school. Rather, it illustrates the increasingly complex profiles of need now emerging across many Irish primary schools.

The National Principals' Forum recognises the significant progress made in advancing inclusive education and the substantial investment committed by successive Governments. The purpose of this chapter is not to revisit the challenges already identified, but to consider the potential consequences if governance, information systems and workforce capacity do not continue to evolve alongside changing educational need.

The evidence presented throughout this submission suggests that many of the pressures currently experienced by schools are structural rather than temporary. If these trends continue, a number of significant risks may increasingly affect the long-term sustainability of inclusive education.

7.1 Reduced Capacity for Early Intervention

Early intervention remains one of the cornerstones of successful inclusive education.

However, where Special Education Teacher allocations do not keep pace with changing pupil need, schools are increasingly required to prioritise support for pupils presenting with the greatest levels of need.

Where early intervention becomes more limited, pupils' needs may become increasingly complex before appropriate support can be provided.

7.2 Increasing Pressure on Mainstream Classrooms

The mainstream classroom teacher is the primary educator of every child.

As pupil needs become increasingly diverse, teachers require sufficient access to specialist support, professional learning and collaborative planning.

Without continued investment in whole-school capacity, there is a risk that mainstream classrooms will be expected to respond to increasingly complex needs without the level of support necessary to sustain high-quality teaching and learning for all pupils.

This poses significant risk to the quality of teaching and learning experienced by all pupils within increasingly diverse classrooms.

7.3 Growing Leadership Burden

The role of the school principal continues to evolve beyond educational leadership into the coordination of increasingly complex interagency systems.

Without greater administrative capacity, clearer interagency accountability and more responsive support structures, the demands placed upon school leaders are likely to continue increasing.

Over time, this may affect the attractiveness, sustainability and succession of school leadership, particularly within teaching principal schools.

7.4 Increasing Inequality Between Schools

Schools differ significantly in their capacity to absorb additional pressures.

Some benefit from larger leadership teams, stronger administrative supports or greater opportunities for local fundraising.

Others, particularly smaller rural schools and schools serving disadvantaged communities, have fewer opportunities to supplement finite resources.

Where core provision increasingly depends upon local capacity, there is a risk that inequities between schools may widen despite a national commitment to equity, as much as equality.

7.5 Reduced Confidence Among Families

Parents rightly expect that when their child enrols in school, appropriate educational supports will be available.

Where delays in assessment, therapeutic services or resource allocation persist, schools often become the visible face of wider system pressures.

This can lead to understandable frustration among families, despite schools working tirelessly to meet children's needs.

Maintaining parental confidence in inclusive education depends upon a wider system that responds in a timely, coordinated and effective manner.

7.6 Increasing Reliance on Appeals and Exceptional Review Processes

Appeals and exceptional review mechanisms are intended to provide schools with a means of responding to genuinely exceptional or unforeseen changes in pupil need.

However, where allocation systems are insufficiently responsive to the changing profile of need within schools, these processes risk becoming the primary mechanism through which schools seek to secure the resources required to support pupils.

As reliance on appeals increases, the processes themselves may become less effective in responding to genuinely exceptional circumstances, while placing additional administrative demands on both schools and the agencies responsible for reviewing applications.

A sustainable allocation system should minimise the need for repeated appeals by responding proactively to changing patterns of need. A sustainable allocation system should minimise reliance on repeated appeals by responding proactively to changing patterns of educational need.

7.7 A Risk to the Sustainability of Inclusive Education

The greatest risk identified throughout this submission is not to the principle of inclusive education, but to its long-term sustainability. These risks outlined in this chapter are interconnected. Weakness in one part of the system increases pressure across every other part.

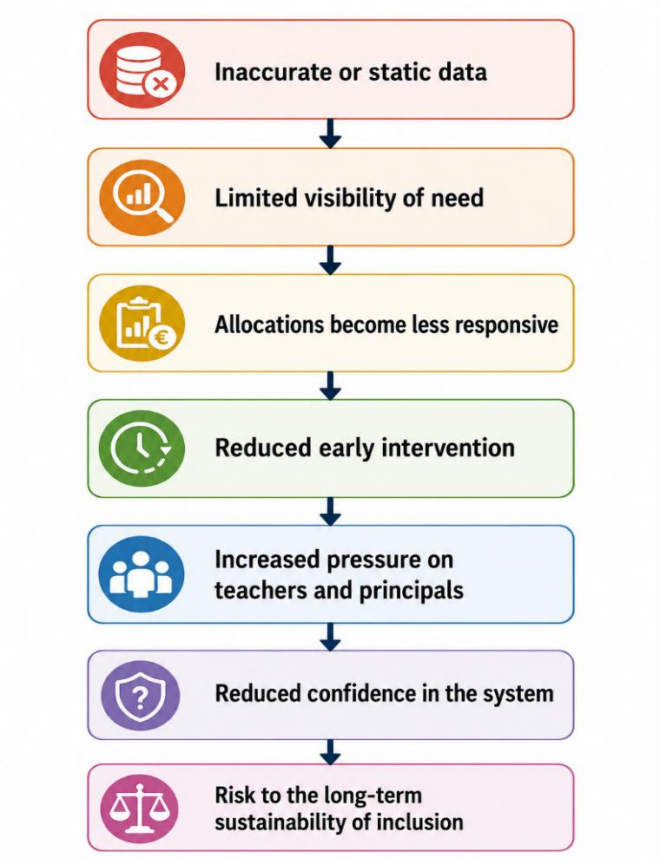


Figure 20: The Domino Effect - if the systems underpinning inclusion do not evolve alongside changing educational need, there is a risk that the gap between policy ambition and operational capacity will continue to widen.

Schools remain firmly committed to inclusion. Teachers continue to adapt their practice; principals continue to coordinate increasingly complex systems of support and families continue to place enormous trust in their local schools. However, commitment alone cannot compensate indefinitely for limitations in system capacity.

Ireland has demonstrated a clear and sustained commitment to inclusive education. The challenge now is to ensure that the governance systems supporting schools evolve alongside changing patterns of educational need.

The recommendations presented in Chapter 8 provide a practical framework for strengthening the information, governance, capacity and allocation systems upon which sustainable inclusive education depends.

Ultimately, the question facing policymakers is no longer whether Ireland should pursue inclusive education. It is whether the systems supporting schools are evolving quickly enough to ensure that every child receives the support they need to learn, participate, belong and thrive.

CHAPTER 8 A Framework for Strengthening Inclusive Education

Throughout this submission, the National Principals' Forum has demonstrated that while Ireland has made significant progress in advancing inclusive education, the next phase of inclusive education must focus on strengthening the systems that enable inclusion to be delivered successfully in every school.

The recommendations that follow build upon existing policy as pupil need continue to evolve, they are intended to be complementary, as together they form a coherent framework for strengthening the systems that underpin inclusive education.

These recommendations are directed to the education system as a whole. While responsibility for implementation rests across several organisations, including the Department of Education, the National Council for Special Education and partner agencies, effective reform will depend upon coordinated action across the system, in collaboration with those on the ground.

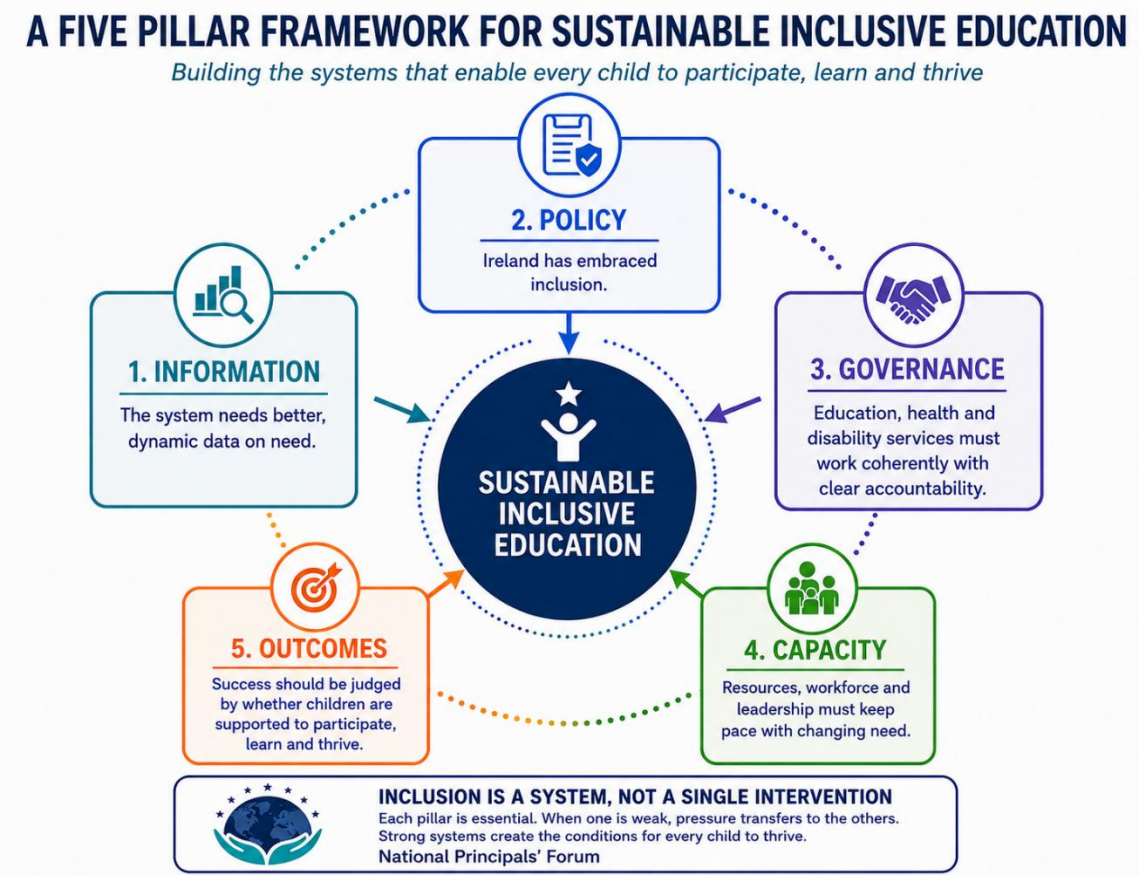


Figure 21: Inclusive education is a whole-system endeavour. Sustainable implementation depends upon the interaction of policy, information, capacity, governance and outcomes, with each pillar supporting the effectiveness of the others.



8.1 Strengthening the Legislative and Policy Framework for Inclusive Education

Ireland has established a strong legislative and policy foundation for inclusive education through the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, the Education Act 1998, the Disability Act 2005 and its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Collectively, these frameworks establish the right of every child to an appropriate education and place clear responsibilities on the State to ensure that inclusive education is supported by effective planning, appropriate resources and coordinated services.

The EPSEN Act 2004

The EPSEN Act established a rights-based vision for inclusive education, supported by coordinated planning between education, health and other relevant services. While its principles have significantly influenced education policy, several important provisions remain uncommenced.

The recent Government Review of the EPSEN Act provides an important opportunity to strengthen both the legislative framework and the systems that support its implementation.

The National Principals' Forum recommends that implementation of the EPSEN Review should:

- strengthen national SEN information to support evidence-informed planning.
- ensure Student Support Plans are accompanied by appropriate resources and professional supports.
- improve coordination between education, health and disability services; and
- recognise the increasingly complex leadership role undertaken by school principals.

The Education Act 1998

The Education Act places the educational interests of the child at the centre of the education system and recognises every child's right to receive an education appropriate to their abilities and needs.

Achieving this objective requires more than equality of access. It requires equity. While equality ensures every child can attend school, equity ensures that schools receive the resources, capacity and professional supports necessary to meet differing levels of need so that every child can participate, learn and achieve.

The National Principals' Forum recommends that future policy should:

- ensure resource allocation reflects the differing levels and complexity of need within schools.
- strengthen school capacity to deliver an education appropriate to every child's needs; and
- embed equity as a guiding principle within future allocation and funding models.

The Disability Act 2005

The Disability Act provides children with a statutory entitlement to an Assessment of Need (AON). Timely and comprehensive assessment is fundamental to early intervention, coordinated planning and access to appropriate supports.

While schools do not require a diagnosis to provide educational support through the Continuum of Support, delays in Assessment of Need frequently delay access to therapeutic services and increase pressure on schools to manage increasingly complex needs without the necessary multidisciplinary support.

The National Principals' Forum recommends:

- reducing waiting times for Assessment of Need.
- ensuring timely access to multidisciplinary assessment and intervention.
- strengthening links between assessment, educational planning and service delivery; and
- recognising timely assessment as an essential component of effective inclusive education.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

Article 24 of the UNCRPD commits Ireland to ensuring an inclusive education system at all levels, supported by appropriate accommodation, effective supports and equal participation.

The next challenge is ensuring that governance systems evolve at the same pace as policy ambition.

The National Principals' Forum therefore recommends:

- strengthening governance, information systems and workforce capacity to support implementation of Article 24.
- ensuring inclusive education is underpinned by timely access to educational, health and disability support; and
- monitoring implementation through ongoing engagement with practising school leaders.

From Policy to Practice

Schools have embraced inclusive education. Every day they identify need, develop Student Support Plans, coordinate multidisciplinary supports and work collaboratively with families to ensure children can participate fully in school life.

The evidence presented throughout this submission demonstrates that the next phase of inclusive education is no longer primarily legislative. It is operational. Governance structures, information systems, allocation models and interagency collaboration must now evolve alongside the changing profile of need within schools.

Evaluate Policy Through Operational Evidence

Future reviews of inclusive education policy should include structured engagement with practising school leaders, whose operational experience provides valuable evidence of how policy functions in practice.



8.2 Strengthening the Information Needed for Inclusive Education to Be Most Effective and Successful

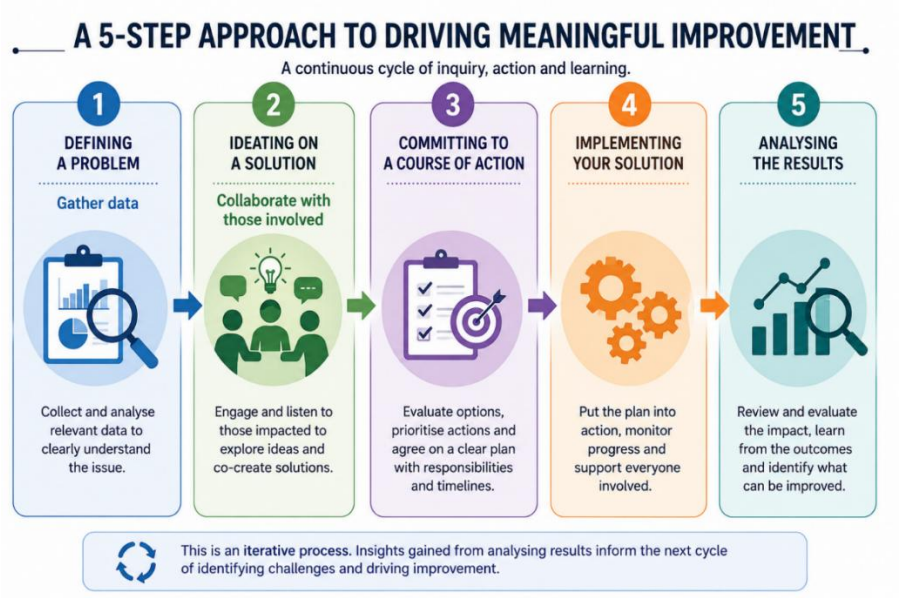


Figure 22: The first step in solving a problem is identifying it, defining it, quantifying it – and this all starts with gathering information.

The First Step - Build a National SEN Data Infrastructure

The Department of Education, working with the NCSE and schools, should develop a secure national SEN information framework.

This is not proposed as a return to diagnosis-led allocation. Nor is it intended to create unnecessary administrative burden. Rather, it reflects the principle that effective planning depends upon accurate and current information.

A modern education system should possess the capacity to understand how pupil need is changing over time. This information would strengthen national planning, improve confidence in allocation decisions and enable resources to respond more effectively to emerging trends.

The POD system could be readily utilised to gather this information. Alternatively, the Annual School Census could be expanded for this purpose, or a new national mechanism could be developed to capture accurate, current and verifiable SEN information. This would enable the Department of Education and the NCSE to maintain an accurate, dynamic profile of special educational need within schools, supporting a more responsive, evidence-informed system that anticipates emerging need rather than responding only after pressures have become acute.

This recommendation would not require schools to determine resource allocation or funding decisions. Rather, it would ensure that those responsible for planning and allocating resources are informed by the most accurate, current and school-informed information available. Schools are not seeking to determine policy; they are seeking to contribute the information they already hold so that policy decisions can be based upon a more complete and responsive understanding of educational need.

Information gathered should include:

- Diagnosed SEN
- Awaiting Assessment
- Care Needs requiring SNA support.

Schools are already entrusted with identifying, planning for and monitoring special education educational need through the Continuum of Support. They should also be trusted to contribute accurate, current information to strengthen the national evidence base upon which future planning and allocation decisions are made.



8.3 Strengthening Capacity for Inclusive Education

Develop More Responsive Allocation Systems

As the prevalence and complexity of special educational need continue to evolve, allocation systems must also evolve to remain responsive, equitable and evidence informed.

The National Principals' Forum recommends a comprehensive review of the current allocation framework to ensure that it continues to reflect the changing profile of need within schools. The review should consider:

- the responsiveness of SET allocation methodologies to changing school profiles.
- opportunities to incorporate dynamic school-level information into future allocation models.
- the operation of mid-cycle review mechanisms for schools experiencing significant changes in enrolment or complexity of need.
- the effectiveness, transparency and timeliness of exceptional review processes for Special Needs Assistant (SNA) allocations; and
- mechanisms that enable changing patterns of need to be recognised through routine allocation processes rather than relying primarily on appeals or exceptional reviews.

Allocation systems should respond proactively to changing patterns of educational need rather than relying predominantly on appeals and exceptional review processes.

Strengthen Whole-School Capacity

Ensure that the establishment of new Special Classes is accompanied by appropriate investment in whole-school capacity, including SET provision, leadership, accommodation, professional learning and access to specialist supports.

Successful inclusion within Special Classes depends upon the strength of mainstream provision. Integration is not achieved simply through physical proximity. It depends upon mainstream classrooms having sufficient capacity to welcome pupils from Special Classes for shared learning, social interaction and participation in wider school life. Where mainstream teachers are already managing increasingly complex levels of need with finite specialist support, opportunities for meaningful integration become more difficult to sustain.

Develop a National Professional Learning Strategy for Inclusive Education

A skilled, confident and well-supported workforce is fundamental to the successful implementation of inclusive education. As the profile and complexity of pupils' needs continue to evolve, so too must the professional knowledge and expertise of those responsible for supporting them.

The development of a nationally coordinated professional learning strategy for teachers, Special Education Teachers, Special Needs Assistants and school leaders is recommended. Professional learning should be continuous, evidence-informed and responsive to emerging educational needs.

Priority areas should include those identified in Chapter 4 - *Figure 16*

Whole-school professional learning supporting national initiatives, including programmes such as NCSE RELATE, NEPS Trauma-Informed Practice, Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations, should be readily accessible to schools, with protected time provided for meaningful participation.

Access to essential training should not depend on a school's geographical location or financial capacity. A nationally coordinated approach should ensure that all schools can access both universal and specialist training in a timely manner, with appropriate funding and substitute cover where required.

Initial teacher education and Special Needs Assistant training should continue to evolve to reflect the realities of contemporary inclusive classrooms. An inclusive education system cannot rely on specialist staff alone; every classroom teacher should be equipped with the knowledge, confidence and practical skills to support the diverse needs of the pupils they teach.

Investment in professional learning is an investment in workforce capacity and an essential foundation for sustainable inclusive education.

Evaluate the outcomes of the NCSE School Inclusion Model

The NCSE School Inclusion Model reflects many of the principles advanced throughout this submission, including early intervention, multidisciplinary collaboration and whole-school capacity building.

While the School Inclusion Model has shown considerable promise, its implementation has to date been limited to a relatively small number of pilot schools. As a result, many schools continue to operate without access to the enhanced supports and collaborative structures that the model seeks to provide.

The evaluation of the School Inclusion Model should be prioritised and that, where evidence demonstrates positive outcomes for children, schools and families, consideration should be given to its timely and phased national expansion and implementation to strengthen whole-school capacity for inclusive education. Ensuring that successful innovations are evaluated and

implemented at pace will help ensure that good practice benefits all schools rather than remaining confined to a limited number of pilot settings.

Ensure Funding Reflects Operational Reality

Schools continue to report increasing operational costs associated with delivering inclusive education, which are not recognised or accounted for by any dedicated grant support.

Future funding models should better recognise the cumulative costs associated with inclusion, including administration, environmental adaptations, specialised resources, staff development and the growing complexity of school operations.

Reducing reliance on fundraising for essential educational provision should remain a long-term policy objective.



8.4 Strengthening Governance for Inclusive Education

Strengthen Interagency Accountability

Inclusive education extends beyond education policy alone.

Schools increasingly work alongside health, disability, therapeutic and child protection services. While each agency makes an important contribution, school leaders consistently report that responsibility for coordinating these services increasingly rests with schools.

The National Principals' Forum recommends the development of a more integrated framework for interagency collaboration that clearly defines responsibilities, improves communication and reduces unnecessary administrative duplication.

Children and families benefit most when agencies work together rather than sequentially.

Recognise School Leadership as Critical Infrastructure

The role of the principal has evolved significantly.

School leaders now coordinate increasingly complex educational, administrative and multidisciplinary systems.

This leadership function is fundamental to successful inclusion.

Future policy should recognise this reality through:

- appropriate administrative support.
- leadership development specific to inclusive education.
- reduced administrative duplication.
- greater recognition of the coordination role undertaken by principals.

Recognising and supporting school leadership is not separate from strengthening inclusive education. It is one of the essential conditions for its successful implementation.

Monitor and Evaluate the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education should continue to evolve through regular evaluation informed by those responsible for implementing it every day.

The National Principals' Forum recommends the establishment of a structured national review process to evaluate the implementation of inclusive education using evidence from schools, pupils, families and relevant education, health and disability agencies. Reviews should consider:

- changing patterns of special educational need.
- the responsiveness of allocation systems.
- workforce capacity and professional learning.
- interagency collaboration; and
- educational participation, pupil outcomes and the operational experience of school leaders.

Regular evaluation will strengthen accountability, support continuous improvement and ensure that future policy remains grounded in operational evidence. As the professionals responsible for translating national policy into daily practice, principals should play an ongoing role in informing this process.

Regular review will ensure that policy remains responsive to changing educational need and informed by operational evidence.



8.5 Strengthening Outcomes for Inclusive Education

The recommendations presented throughout this chapter are intended to strengthen the systems that underpin inclusive education so that every child can access an education appropriate to their individual needs. Together, the five pillars of **Policy, Information, Capacity, Governance and Outcomes** provide a practical framework for ensuring that inclusive education remains sustainable, equitable and responsive to the changing profile of need within Irish primary schools.

Successful implementation of these recommendations will contribute to:

- more accurate and evidence-informed educational planning.
- more responsive and equitable resource allocation.
- earlier identification of emerging need and timelier intervention.
- stronger collaboration across education, health and disability services.
- increased confidence among schools, families and policymakers; and
- improved participation, wellbeing and educational outcomes for children.

Strengthening inclusive education is also an investment in schools. Better information will support better planning. More responsive allocation systems will strengthen school capacity. Improved interagency collaboration, timely assessment, professional learning and appropriate operational supports will reduce unnecessary administrative burden and enable school leaders, teachers and Special Needs Assistants to focus more fully on teaching, learning and supporting children.

Ireland has made significant progress in advancing inclusive education. The next phase of inclusive education is to ensure that the systems supporting schools evolve with the same ambition. Successful inclusion is measured not simply by whether children attend their local school, but by whether they receive the support they need to learn, participate, belong and thrive.

By strengthening the systems that underpin inclusive education, Ireland can continue to build an education system that is responsive to changing need, sustainable for schools and capable of delivering better outcomes for every child.

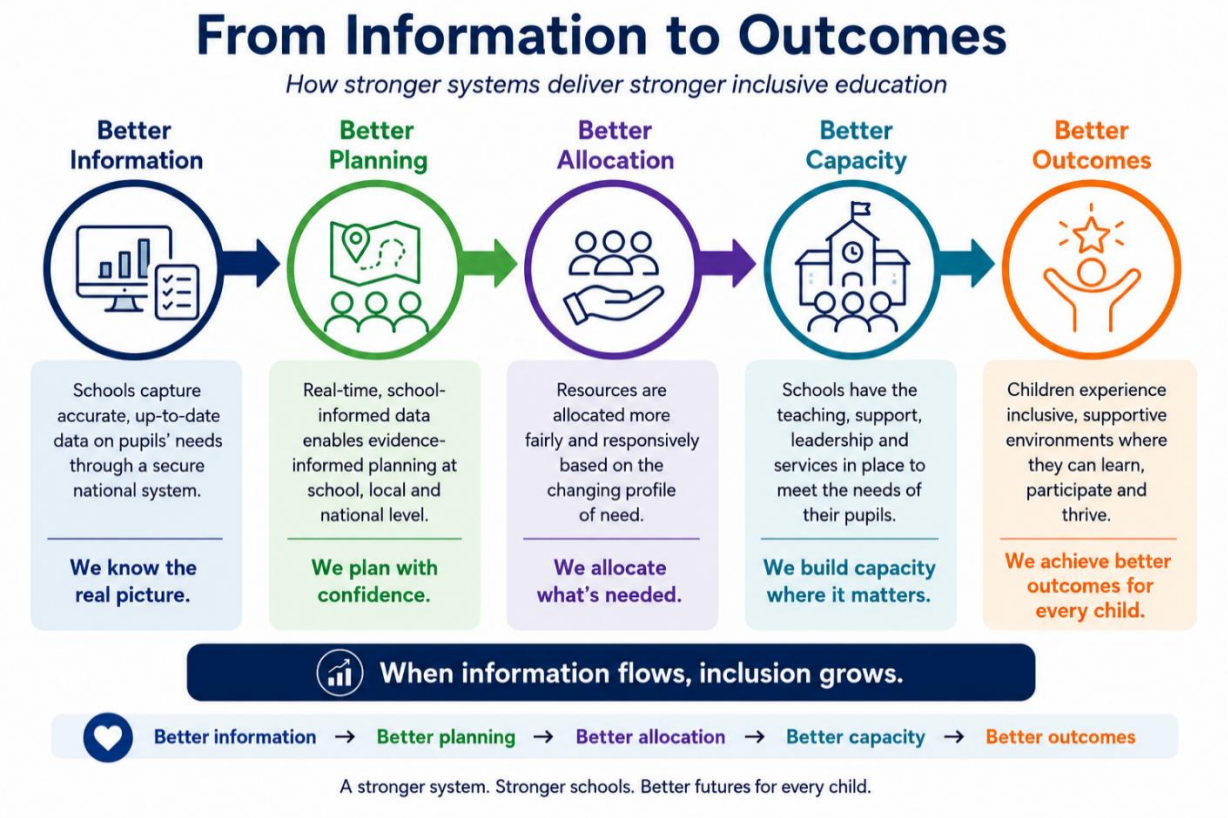


Figure 23: This framework summarises the central proposition of this submission. Sustainable inclusive education depends upon strengthening the systems that support it. Better information enables better planning; better planning supports more responsive allocation; responsive allocation strengthens school capacity; and stronger capacity leads to better educational outcomes for children. The recommendations presented throughout this chapter are designed to strengthen each stage of this improvement pathway, ensuring that policy ambition is matched by the information, governance and capacity required to deliver inclusive education successfully in practice.



Conclusion

Ireland has travelled a remarkable distance in advancing inclusive education. Over the past two decades, successive Governments have demonstrated a clear commitment to ensuring that increasing numbers of children can learn and participate within their local schools through sustained investment in Special Education Teachers, Special Needs Assistants, Special Classes and a wide range of additional supports. School communities have embraced that ambition with professionalism, compassion and an unwavering commitment to ensuring that every child is welcomed, supported and given the opportunity to belong.

The National Principals' Forum warmly welcomes this progress. Every day, principals, teachers, Special Education Teachers and Special Needs Assistants translate national policy into lived reality for children and families. They do so willingly because they believe deeply in inclusive education and in the principle that every child deserves to participate meaningfully in school life.

This submission has therefore never been an argument against inclusion. It is an argument for ensuring that the systems supporting inclusion continue to evolve alongside the changing profile of need within Irish schools.

Throughout this submission, one central theme has consistently emerged. The greatest challenge now facing inclusive education is not one of ambition, but of implementation. As schools support increasingly diverse and complex needs, the systems responsible for planning, allocating resources and coordinating support must remain equally dynamic and responsive.

The National Principals' Forum has raised these issues not because school leaders wish to shape policy from the sidelines, but because they are uniquely placed to observe how policy operates in practice. Principals work every day at the intersection of education, health, disability and family support services. They see where systems work well, where pressures are emerging and where opportunities exist to strengthen them. With that perspective comes a professional responsibility to contribute constructively to the continued development of inclusive education. Remaining silent in the face of persistent systemic challenges would not serve schools, families or, most importantly, the children whose educational experiences depend upon those systems.

The recommendations contained within this submission are offered in that spirit. They do not seek to replace the existing model of inclusive education, but to strengthen it by improving the quality of information informing decision-making, supporting more responsive planning and resource allocation, strengthening workforce and leadership capacity, and fostering more effective collaboration across education, health and disability services.

Ireland now has an important opportunity to build upon the substantial progress already achieved. By ensuring that governance evolves alongside changing educational need, Ireland

can continue to develop an inclusive education system that is evidence-informed, responsive, sustainable and capable of delivering high-quality educational experiences for every child.

The future of inclusive education will not be determined solely by our commitment to inclusion, but by our collective capacity to sustain it. The framework presented throughout this submission is intended to support that next stage of development - where strong systems enable strong schools, and strong schools enable every child not simply to be included, but to learn, participate, belong and thrive.

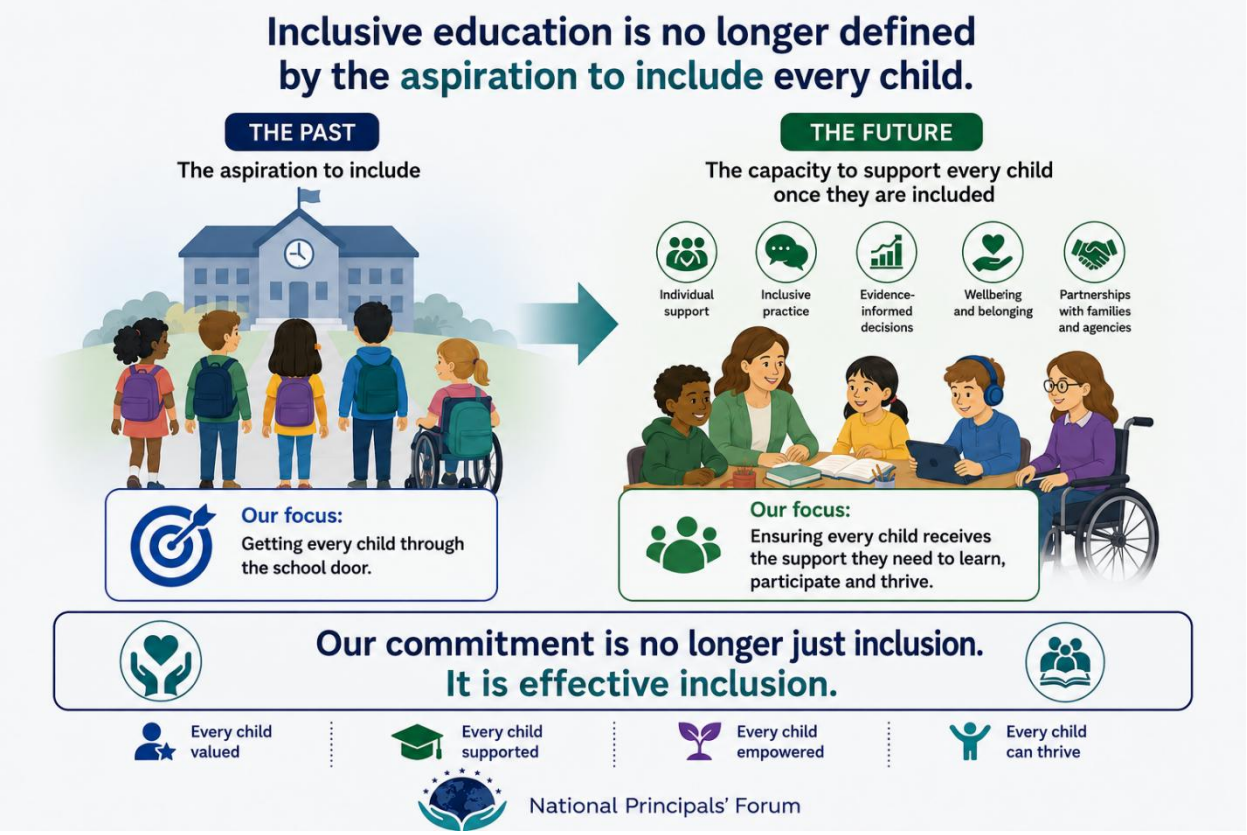


Figure 24: Shared Vision for Inclusive Education



Appendix 1 – National Principals' Forum School Survey June 2026

Appendix 2 – Case Study: When System Design Meets School Reality



Introduction

The National Principals' Forum surveyed principals from across the country regarding special education. Three themes dominate the findings from 223 school nationwide -

1. Schools are committed to inclusion but feel under-resourced

Principals overwhelmingly support inclusion but believe current resources are insufficient to meet growing and increasingly complex needs.

2. The greatest problems often lie outside schools

Delays in assessments, therapeutic services and specialist supports were identified more frequently than almost any school-based issue.

3. School leaders are carrying an unsustainable burden

The administration, coordination and advocacy required to secure support for pupils has become a major component of school leadership, with near-universal calls for additional support and resources.

The survey presents a picture of school leaders who remain committed to inclusion, but who increasingly feel that responsibility has expanded faster than the supports needed to deliver it successfully. The rest of this report contains statistics and analysis.

Analysis of Data

The following were the responses:

Teaching Principal	**50.7 %**
Administrative Principal	**49.3 %**

Resource Allocation

Does your current SET allocation adequately meet pupil needs?

No	82.2%
Yes	17.8%

Summary:
More than four out of five principals believe their current SET allocation does not adequately meet pupil needs.

Does your current SNA allocation adequately meet pupil needs?

No 65.3%

Yes 34.7%

Summary:

Almost two-thirds of school's report that current SNA allocations are insufficient.

Have you had to manage pupil needs that exceeded available SET resources?

Frequently 71.6%

Occasionally 21.8%

Rarely 5.8%

Never 0.9%

Summary:

SET shortages are a routine reality in most schools, with over 93% reporting this occurs at least occasionally.

Have you had to manage pupil needs that exceeded available SNA resources?

Frequently 58.2%

Occasionally 29.8%

Rarely 9.8%

Never 2.2%

Summary:

Nearly nine in ten schools have experienced situations where pupil needs exceeded available SNA supports.

Have delays in supports, assessments or services impacted provision?

Yes 94.2%

No 5.8%

Summary:

This was one of the strongest findings in the survey. Almost every principal reported that delays in assessments and external services negatively affect support for pupils.

Themes from Principal Feedback

The most common issues raised were:

- Delays in Psychological/Educational assessments
- Limited NEPS access
- Long waiting lists for speech and language therapy and occupational therapy
- Lack of follow-up supports after assessment.
- Schools managing increasingly complex needs without specialist input.

Summary: Principals consistently described a system where educational supports are often delayed by difficulties accessing health and therapeutic services.

SEN Data and Planning

Do the Department and NCSE have accurate SEN data for your school?

No 71.6%

Unsure 15.1%

Yes 13.3%

Summary:

Only a small minority believe national planning is based on accurate and current information about need within their school.

Would you support restoration of SEN data collection through POD?

Yes 80.0%

Unsure 16.4%

No 3.6%

Summary:

There is overwhelming support for a mechanism allowing schools to directly update SEN profile information. Principals appointed since 2019 may not be aware that this was ever an option for school previously.

How confident are you that allocations reflect actual need?

Not confident at all 56.0%

Less confident 26.7%

Neutral 9.8%

Somewhat confident 5.8%

Very confident 1.8%

Summary:

Over 82% of respondents expressed low confidence that current allocations accurately reflect need within their schools.

Operational Reality of Inclusion

Has the complexity of managing SEN provision increased over the past five years?

Increased by more than 10 hours 85.3%

Increased by 10 hours or less 12.4%

Remained the same 2.2%

Summary:

Almost every principal reported increased complexity, with the vast majority indicating a significant increase.

Most frequently identified barriers to inclusion

Principals most commonly identified:

- Delays in assessments
- Delays in external services
- Insufficient SET allocation
- Insufficient SNA allocations
- Changes to SNA allocation criteria – reduces capacity to support pupils without primary care needs but still in need of SNA support.
- Lack of therapeutic supports
- Administrative workload
- Communication between agencies
- Difficulties accessing NCSE supports.

- Lack of specialist placements

Summary:

The barriers identified extend well beyond schools and highlight significant challenges across education, health and disability services.

School Leadership Impact

Has SEN administration increased leadership workload?

Increased significantly 91.1%

Increased somewhat 8.9%

Summary:

Every respondent reported an increase in workload associated with coordinating special education provision.

Do school leaders require additional support?

Yes 97.3%

No 2.7%

Summary:

There is near-universal agreement that school leaders require additional administrative and professional support.

Themes from Principal Feedback

The most common recommendations were:

- Increased SET allocation
- Faster assessments
- Greater therapeutic support
- Better interagency communication
- Additional specialist placements
- Dedicated support for SEN coordination

Summary:

Principals consistently sought practical capacity-building measures rather than major structural reform.

Funding and Inclusion

Do current funding levels adequately support special education?

Seriously inadequate 26.2%

Inadequate 31.6%

Partially adequate 26.7%

Mostly adequate 14.2%

Fully adequate 1.3%

Summary:

Almost 58% of principals believe funding is either inadequate or seriously inadequate, while only 1.3% believe it is fully adequate.

Have schools used general school funds to support SEN needs?

Frequently 60.9%

Occasionally 32.0%

Rarely 5.3%

Never 1.8%

Summary:

Schools are regularly using general budgets and fundraising income to meet SEN-related costs.

SEN Training

Are current professional learning opportunities sufficient?

No 72.4%

Partially 24.0%

Yes 3.6%

Summary:

Most principals believe professional learning opportunities have not kept pace with increasingly complex pupil needs.

Areas where additional training is most needed - Principals most frequently identified:

- Autism
- Emotional and behavioural needs
- Speech and language difficulties
- Trauma-informed practice
- Managing complex needs
- Inclusive classroom practice

- Communication and language development
- Assistive technology
- SEN leadership and coordination

Summary: Training priorities closely reflect the growing complexity of needs being encountered in schools.

Additional Resources

What would have the greatest positive impact on inclusion?

- ✓ Additional SET allocation 35.6%
- ✓ Access to therapeutic supports 22.2%
- ✓ Faster assessments and external services 12.4%
- ✓ Administrative support for inclusion coordination 12.4%
- ✓ Additional SNA allocation 12.0%
- ✓ Improved data and planning systems 2.7%
- ✓ Additional SEN training 2.7%

Summary:

Additional SET allocation emerged as the single most requested resource. However, when combined, therapeutic supports and faster access to assessments account for over one-third of responses, highlighting the importance of wider system supports alongside educational resources.

Overall Survey Message

Three clear themes emerge:

- Current resources are not keeping pace with pupil need, particularly in relation to SET allocation.
- Delays in assessments and therapeutic services are having a significant impact on schools' ability to support pupils.
- School leaders are carrying an increasingly heavy administrative burden and believe additional support is urgently required.

Sample Quotes

Delays in Assessments and Services

> "We have received no assessments for children from our NEPS psychologist for the last 7 years."
> *(Principal, Clare)*

"Pupils engaging in school refusal not engaged with TESS in a suitable time frame. Psychologist on leave, no replacement."
(Principal, Kilkenny)

"No NEPS psychologist assigned to the school. Parents are having to pay for expensive private assessments."
(Principal, Kerry)

"Chronic delays in OT assessments and service provision. Pupils referred in Junior Infants have just been called in 3rd Class."
(Principal, [County withheld])

"We have a child presenting with traits of ADHD or neurodiversity and the parent is trying to access supports through public channels and the waiting list is too long so there is no assessment."
(Principal, Waterford)

"We have many students on long lists to access support. To give an example, we have a non-verbal child in Junior Infants who has been on a waiting list for assessment for 2.5 years."
(Principal, Meath)

"We have several children waiting 1.5 years or more for assessment. We are plugging gaps and trying to figure out speech and language needs and sensory needs so we can support children."
(Principal, Limerick)

Schools Carrying the Burden

"All organisations such as these are pulling back and doing less with schools expected to do more."
(Principal, [County withheld])

"We are implementing measures which we think might be of benefit, but we are doing so without an assessment."
(Principal, Waterford)

"We currently have pupils on reduced school days because there are insufficient or inappropriate services."
(Principal, Galway)

"We are opening our doors to all children and doing our best to be inclusive, however we are being let down badly by the lack of external support services, by the amount of red tape and continual chasing up of referrals with outside agencies."
(Principal, Donegal)

"The only children who are receiving regular specialist input are those whose parents can pay for private therapists."
(Principal, Tipperary)

SET Allocation and Resourcing

"The General Allocation Model is a joke. The catch-all is catching none."
(Principal, Mayo)

"Trust that what we ask for is needed and don't make us fight or use our energy begging."
(Principal, Galway)

"Assessing our SET allocation based on enrolments, standardised scores and where our children live is not an adequate model to determine whether our children deserve support."
(Principal, Wicklow)

"Every small school in the country should have a full-time SET."
(Principal, Tipperary)

"Stop cutting SET hours based on educational profiles and disadvantage profiles. The current data does not reflect the true story in any school."
(Principal, Longford)

"Good results in standardised testing have been used to reduce allocations."
(Principal, [County withheld])

Leadership Workload

"More administrative time to allow for meetings, phone calls, paperwork regarding referrals etc."
(Principal, Donegal)

"Extra time to work on Student Support Files, planning, reading assessments, keeping up to date with circulars and consulting with teachers, parents and outside agencies."
(Principal, Clare)

"There is no time off for school leaders such as me."
(Principal, Waterford)

"I spend hours and hours at night completing the administrative tasks of the job as we do not have sufficient SET resources in school and I end up trying to fill the gaps."
(Principal, Wicklow)

"Trying to lead special education is multi-faceted and very paper heavy. Reports, files, support plans, reviews. I feel like it is more about the reports and less about

the child."
(Principal, Dublin)

Therapeutic Supports

"OT, SLT, Educational Psychologist and other therapeutic supports should be allocated to all schools."
(Principal, Kerry)

"Access to therapeutic supports for pupils, particularly those with exceptionally complex needs who require specialist input."
(Principal, Tipperary)

"The reality of special education in our school is that staff are highly committed to meeting the needs of all pupils, but increasing levels of need combined with limited resources and delays in accessing external supports place significant pressure on schools."
(Principal, Cork)

"Needs are becoming more complex every year. The CDNT teams are not adequately staffed to provide assessments, therapies and supports so schools are plugging the gaps."
(Principal, Limerick)

Inclusion and Behaviour

"There is an inclusion illusion in schools."
(Principal, Longford)

"Managing challenging behaviour is becoming one of the most significant issues facing primary schools."
(Principal, Tipperary)

"We are seeing increasing numbers of children presenting with behaviours consistent with attachment and trauma. This is not reflected in the allocation model."
(Principal, Dublin)

"Insufficient staffing is having a severe impact on all children in my school, not just those with SEN."
(Principal, Wicklow)

"The SNA SET review model is a farce."
(Principal, Galway)

Commitment Despite the Challenges

"Staff are going above and beyond every day with very little support because of the vocational aspect of the job in caring for pupils with SEN."
(Principal, Dublin)

"We are constantly trying to do the best for the children with special education needs. We try and get parents on board, but this takes lots of time and is relationship based."
(Principal, Clare)

"Special education staff in our school are deeply committed to supporting all children but increasing levels of need are placing significant pressure on available resources and supports."
(Principal, Limerick)

Key Findings

- **82.2% of principals report SET allocations do not meet pupil needs.**
- **65.3% report SNA allocations do not meet pupil needs.**
- **94.2% say delays in assessments and external services affect pupil support.**
- **82.7% have little or no confidence that allocations reflect actual need.**
- **97.3% believe school leaders require additional support.**
- **92.9% report using general school funds to support SEN provision.**
- **85.3% report SEN administration has increased significantly in recent years.**

Top 10 Recommendations

1. Increase SET allocations nationally.
2. Restore SEN data collection through POD.
3. Reduce waiting times for assessments.
4. Expand NEPS provision.
5. Improve access to Speech & Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy.
6. Establish dedicated inclusion administration supports.
7. Review the General Allocation Model.
8. Expand specialist placements.
9. Increase professional development opportunities.
10. Develop a joined-up education and health response to SEN.

APPENDIX 2 – CASE STUDY – PRIMARY SCHOOL SEN DATA 2025–2026

Junior Infants	**Senior Infants**	**First Class**	**Second Class**
1 (Selective Mutism) 2 3 4 5 6 (UKR/EAL) 1 girls/5 boys = 6 pupils	7 (Severe SLD – Language school recommendation – no places available) 8 9 10 11 12 13 (Referred to Primary Care – Psychology + SLT) 14 (Awaiting AON – ASD/ADHD?) 5 girls/3 boys = 8	15 (Accessing SLT) 16 17 (referred to primary care OT) 18 19 20 (Accessing SLT) 21 22 23 24 (ASD) 4 girls/6 boys = 10	25 26 27 (PTSD/ Awaiting Dyslexia Assessment) 28 (Severe SLD/ Awaiting Dyslexia Assessment)) 29 30 (NF1/ASD) 6 boys = 6
Teacher + 0.5 SNA **3 pupils Integrating from ASD class**		**Teacher + FT SNA** **4 pupils integrating from ASD Class**	
Third Class	**Fourth Class**	**Fifth Class**	**Sixth Class**
31 32 (Dyspraxia) 33 34 35 36 (UKR/EAL) 37 38 (Dyslexia/ASD) 7 girls, 1 boy = 8	39 (Awaiting ADD Assessment) 40 41(ASD/ADHD) 42(Dyslexia/Dyscalculia) 43 44 45 46 47 (SLD/ASD/Dyslexia/ Profound Bilateral Hearing loss) 3 girls, 6 boys = 9	48 (ASD/Dyslexia) 49 (Dyslexia/ADHD) 50 51 52 (ASD/Dyslexia) 53 (ASD/Dyslexia) 54 (Dyslexia) 55 (Dyslexia) 56 57 (Dyslexia) 58 (Dyslexia) 5 girls, 6 boys = 11	59 (Dyslexia) 60 (ASD/ Bronchomalacia) 61 (Profound Bilateral Hearing Loss) 62 (Dyslexia) 63 64 65 (EBD - brother died by suicide) 66 (MGLD) 67 (UKR/EAL) 68 69 70 71 (Awaiting CAMHS Assessment/Anxiety) 72 73 5 girls, 10 boys = 15
Teacher + FT SNA **2 pupils integrating from ASD Class**		**Teacher + FT SNA** **3 pupils integrating from ASD Class**	
Total Mainstream: 75 pupils			
ASD Class: 1 74 – 5th Class [Recently Bereaved of Mum] 75 – 5th Class 76 – 5th Class [ADHD – medicated – 1-1 SNA] 77 – 4th Class 78 – 3rd Class [Brittle Bone Disease] 79 – 2nd Class [Cerebral Palsy, Wheelchair user/GDD/Swallow issues/sight/toileting/ID] 5 boys/1 girls = 6		**ASD Class:2** 80 – 1st Class (Awaiting CAMHS assessment for ADHD) 81 – 1st Class (Coffin-Siri Syndrome/seizures/non verbal/toileting) 82– 1st Class (UKR/EAL) mobility/medical/toileting) 83 – Jnr Infants (non-verbal, toileting) 84 -– Jnr Infants [toileting/ non verbal] 85 – 1st Class (anxiety/school refusal) 2 girls/3 boys = 5	
Teacher + 3 FT SNAs (1 above SERC)		**Teacher + 3 FT SNAs (1 above SERC)**	

Primary School – SEN Data	
Total number of pupils	85 • 12 in ASD Classes • 73 in Mainstream Classes
Pupils with SEN	
Total Number of mainstream pupils with assessed SEN	25 [34.2%]
Total Number of pupils awaiting assessment of SEN at present	9 [12.3%]
Total number of pupils with SEN in Mainstream accessing SET levels 2 & 3	34 [46.5%]
Total SET Allocation	52.5 Hours – equates to 2 Full time SET teachers and 1 part time SET teacher for 2.5 hours per week.
Under the former SEN model what would the school's allocation be? [Resource Hours Based only on pupils with a diagnosis at present] *	GAM (General Allocation Model) – 20 hours of Learning Support 66 Resource Hours 20 + 66 = 86 hours
SET Deficit	86 – 52.5 = 33.5 hours
SNA Support	
Number of mainstream pupils accessing SNA Support for primary care needs	6 [8.2%]
Number of mainstream pupils accessing SNA Support for secondary care needs	18 [24.6%]
Number of SNAs in Mainstream	3.33 [Broken into 2 x FT posts, 1 x 0.83 and 1 x 0.5 across 4 mainstream classrooms]
Total number of pupils requiring SNA Support in Mainstream	24 [32.8%]
SNA Distribution	Highest priority gets the most SNA support. 24 pupils with shared access to 3.33 SNA posts – averages at 6 pupils with care needs per SNA.
SNAs in ASD classes	3 FT per class – one **Above SERC allocation in each ASD class
Total number of EAL Pupils	4
Total Number of EAL Hours	5 per week

**Above SERC means a school has been granted an extra SNA beyond the standard staffing ratio because the students' specific care needs exceed the baseline expectation.

***The list of diagnoses pupils and Low Incidence Hours (Resource) they would have been allocated under the pre-2017 SEN model of support. This list only shows pupils with a diagnosis – it does not include those awaiting referral or assessment, or pupils with high incidence needs such as Dyslexia, MGLD, etc, but who still need access to SET support also.**

Pupil Number & Diagnosis	Resource Hours
1 – Selective Mutism (EBD)	3.5
7 – SSLD	4
24 – ASD	5
27 – PTSD (EBD)	3.5
28 – SSLD	4
38 - ASD	5
41 -ASD/ADHD	5
47 – SSLD/ASD/Dyslexia/ Profound Bilateral Hearing loss	5
48 – ASD	5
49 – ADHD	3.5
52 - ASD	5
53 – ASD	5
60 – ASD/Congenital Lung Condition	5
61 – Profound Bilateral Hearing Loss – Roger system in place	4
65 - EBD	3.5
Total Low Incidence/Resource Hours	66
Plus, GAM Hours/Learning Support	20
Total SEN Support Hours should be:	86 hours
Current SET allocation	52.5 hours
Current SET Deficit	**33.5 hours** **This does not include pupils awaiting assessment/diagnosis or EAL pupils.**

The Department of Education and NCSE knows that our ASD class pupils have an ASD diagnosis, but often not the complexity of their needs, or the multiple diagnosis some pupils have.

They have very limited data on mainstream pupils with SEN from SATs (standardised Attainment Tests) on pupils in 2nd, 4th and 6th Classes annually. Otherwise, unless there is a review or appeal, they have no data or knowledge of our SEN profile. There is no mechanism to relay this information in real time whatsoever.

It is understandable that with chronic waitlists and caseloads, the HSE could not furnish the Department of Education with accurate information on SEN or disability, however schools know our pupils needs – we just need a mechanism by which we can relay them to those making decisions around of SEN allocations and resources.

This case study clearly illustrates the central argument being made here in relation to lack of accurate SEN data, as leading to schools being erroneously profiled for SEN allocations. This school is not an anomaly. These support deficits have serious consequences for schools, for pupils and for inclusive education across the education system.

About the National Principals' Forum

the National Principals' Forum (NPF) is an **independent organisation** established in 2018. It is comprised of voluntary practising principals across Ireland.

Founded on the principle that **education policy is strengthened when informed by operational experience**, the NPF provides a national platform through which practising principals contribute constructively to educational debate, policy development and system improvement.

The Forum works **collaboratively** with school leaders, education partners and policymakers to **identify emerging issues, share evidence from practice and promote solutions** that strengthen schools and improve outcomes for children.

This submission reflects that approach. It is **grounded in the daily experience of school leadership**, informed by research, national surveys and direct engagement with principals across Ireland. It is offered in the belief that the most effective education policy is developed through collaboration between those who shape policy and those responsible for implementing it.



The National Principals' Forum looks forward to continuing to contribute to the future development of inclusive education and to supporting evidence-informed policy that enables **every child to learn, participate, belong and thrive.**

National Principals' Forum

Giving school leaders a voice.
Strengthening education through evidence, experience and collaboration.