National Principals' Forum

OPENING STATEMENT

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth

Examination of Inclusive Education

2 JULY 2026





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

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.**

Chair, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting the National Principals' Forum to contribute to today's discussion on Inclusive Education.

The National Principals' Forum is an independent, practitioner-led organisation representing the operational perspectives of primary school leaders across Ireland. We are grateful for this opportunity.

At the outset, I wish to make one point absolutely clear.

Primary school principals believe in inclusion.

Every day, schools across Ireland welcome children with increasingly diverse and complex needs. We believe every child deserves to belong, participate and flourish in their local school.

The question before us today is therefore not whether inclusion is the right aspiration.

It is whether the systems designed to support inclusion are keeping pace with the reality now being experienced in our schools.

The concerns we present today are not isolated experiences. They reflect consistent patterns reported by school leaders across Ireland for several years.

In preparing our submission, the National Principals' Forum surveyed 225 primary schools across Ireland.

The findings were remarkably consistent. Schools support inclusive education, but they are increasingly concerned that the systems supporting inclusion are no longer keeping pace with the changing needs presenting in schools.

Over 80% of responding schools believe their current Special Education Teaching allocation does not adequately meet pupil need.

Almost every school reported that delays in external assessments and therapeutic services are impacting their ability to support children.

Perhaps most significantly, a clear majority of principals do not believe that the current system has an accurate picture of the special educational needs profile within their schools.

The National Principals' Forum believes that an information gap lies at the heart of many of the challenges facing inclusive education.

Every allocation system is only as good as the information on which it is based.

Schools already collect detailed information about children's needs through the Continuum of Support, Student Support Plans and ongoing review. Yet there is currently no national mechanism through which that information routinely informs educational planning.

Schools know when needs change - whether through new enrolments, increasing complexity or children receiving diagnoses while attending school.

Yet the national system cannot routinely see that information. For almost a decade, schools have had no routine mechanism to update the changing profile of need through the Primary Online Database or an equivalent system. The result is an information gap between what schools know and what the national system routinely sees.

We describe the consequence as "needs inflation". As educational need grows, largely static allocations become progressively less effective. Schools are expected to respond to increasing need with broadly the same specialist capacity. Over time, effective capacity reduces—not because resources have been removed, but because they have not kept pace with changing need, and this is having a significant impact on the delivery of inclusive education on the ground.

This is neither an argument for returning to diagnosis-led allocation nor an argument against inclusion. It is an argument for ensuring that inclusion is underpinned by accurate information, responsive planning and sufficient capacity.

We believe that inclusion is not simply about *where* a child is educated. It is about ensuring every child *has access* to the level of support they need to participate and succeed.

That is why our submission proposes that the next phase of inclusive education should focus on a framework of reform strengthening five interconnected areas:

- policy;
- information;
- capacity;
- governance; and
- outcomes.

Our recommendations are practical and evidence-informed, but they all stem from one central proposition, which is that schools are not asking to decide policy. We are asking to inform policy because we are best placed to know what is needed in our schools. Schools already hold much of the information needed to strengthen planning. We simply need a national system that can use it.

Because,

Accurate information leads to better planning.

Better planning enables more responsive allocations.

More responsive allocation strengthens school capacity.

And stronger schools deliver better outcomes for children.

Schools are working under growing pressure, and school leaders are increasingly required to translate the ambition of inclusive education into operational reality, while responding to needs that continue to evolve faster than the systems designed to support them.

External agencies may understandably operate waiting lists.

Schools cannot.

Children arrive every morning, and schools must respond immediately, regardless of whether external supports are available.

Schools do so willingly, but goodwill cannot indefinitely substitute for system capacity.

If Ireland is to continue strengthening its commitment to inclusive education, then rights-based aspirations must be matched by rights-based resourcing, accurate data, responsive allocation systems and effective interagency collaboration.

The decisions made by this Committee have an opportunity to shape not only the future of inclusive education, but the capacity of schools to deliver it successfully for years to come.

Our purpose today is not to criticise.

It is to contribute constructively.

School leaders are proud of what has been achieved. We simply believe the next stage of inclusive education should be informed by those delivering inclusion every day.

We are not asking the Committee to lower its ambition for inclusion. We are asking that the systems supporting schools become as ambitious as the policy itself.

Ultimately, inclusive education is no longer defined by the aspiration to include every child. It is defined by our collective capacity to ensure that every child receives the support they need once they are included.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

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.

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