

Continuum of Education Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs: Review of International Policies and Practices

Background

The EPSEN Act (2004) provides a commitment to inclusive education for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland stating that ‘a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs’ [section 2]. There are two exceptions to this within the Act where ‘...the nature or degree of those needs of the child [with special educational needs] is such that to do so would be inconsistent with (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated’ [section 2]. The Act also states that one of the functions of the NCSE is ‘to ensure that a continuum of special educational provision is available as required in relation to each type of disability’ [section 20 (1) (g)].

The implication of these two sections of the Act is that while inclusion in a mainstream setting is central to the philosophy of EPSEN, there may be times when other placement options along a continuum of provision may be required. Currently, this continuum of education provision for children with SEN in Ireland predominantly consists of four types of provision; mainstream settings, special classes within mainstream settings, special schools and special classes within special schools. It should be noted that special classes in Ireland operate in different ways; some may be very separate and distinct from mainstream provision, while others are more integrated with the mainstream provision. As a result, they may also be called something other than a special class, such as a special unit or centre. Children with SEN may also be in receipt of education in settings other than those outlined above and all forms of provision along the continuum are relevant to this study.

This review will specifically focus on a detailed documentation and analysis of key national or regional government policies and the manifestation of these policies into practice at a local level in a strategically selected number of countries and jurisdictions. This work will also involve visits to a number of these countries for a more forensic review of policies and practices.

The NCSE has commenced the development of policy advice to the Minister on special education matters. This review is being commissioned in order to enhance its repository of

information from other countries and jurisdictions. An understanding of international policies and practices is a critical reference point for consideration in the Irish context when developing policy advice.

Aims and Research Questions

The overarching aim of this study is to review international policies and practices in the relation to the continuum of education provision for children with SEN to build a bank of information that can be referred to and considered in the development of the NCSE's policy advice on special education matters.

Key research questions include:

1. What does the continuum of education provision for children with SEN look like in other countries and jurisdictions and how does it currently work?
2. What legislation currently underpins and what policies govern the provision in these countries and jurisdictions?
3. What are the criteria for placing children with different SEN in different settings along the continuum of education provision?
4. How does the continuum of education provision for children with SEN in other countries and jurisdictions compare with existing provision and policy in Ireland?
5. In the context of an inclusive education as enshrined within the EPSEN Act (2004), what are the implications of this review for the development or implementation of a continuum of education provision for children with SEN in Ireland?

Key Tasks

Key tasks that will be undertaken to complete this study to:

1. Conduct a review of the international literature focused on the continuum of education provision for children with SEN for the purpose of setting a context for the data collection exercise in other countries/jurisdictions and establishing working definitions.
2. Draw on the literature to develop a common framework for the collection of data from other countries/jurisdictions.
3. Choose, in consultation with NCSE, a number of countries/jurisdictions illustrating a broad range of issues, to be explored in more detail for the study, providing a rationale for choosing these countries/jurisdictions.
4. Document the legislation that underpins and the key policies that govern special education provision along the continuum in these countries/jurisdictions.
5. Describe what the continuum of education provision for children with SEN looks like in these countries/jurisdictions and how it works. Describe the provision in detail covering the following areas:
 - a. Funding models and models for allocation of resources/supports

- b. Type of resources/supports available at school and classroom level (teaching, special education teaching, teaching assistant, care support, assistive technology, psychological, health supports etc.)
 - c. Type of qualifications or professional standards required for teachers/special education teachers working in settings across the continuum
 - d. Type of resources/supports provided from outside of school, from the education system and from other systems, e.g. health system
 - e. Categories or types of SEN catered for along the continuum of provision, i.e. specific SEN categories or mixed SEN categories for special classes or schools
 - f. Placement/enrolment/eligibility criteria for the placement options and review procedures
 - g. Policies and detailed information on the arrangements surrounding dual enrolment/placement in a special school and mainstream school; a special class and mainstream class; or a special class and special school or across any other relevant setting.
6. Choose, in consultation with NCSE, the countries that will be explored in more detail through country visits, providing a rationale for choosing these countries.
 7. In relation to the country visits, provide more detailed information and analysis on the manifestation of these policies into practice at a local level.
 8. Provide an analysis of the trends emerging across these countries/jurisdictions and compare to the Irish context. This comparison and analysis should be located in an overview of the continuum of provision in Ireland and its legislative and policy basis.
 9. Provide a database of source material and contact details of key personnel so that the NCSE can make future contact with other countries/jurisdictions and keep the information up to date.