

Parents Views: Summary of NCSE Research Findings

National Survey of Parental Attitudes to and Experiences of Local and National Special Education Services

December 2010

For the last five years, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has been responsible for providing support to pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish schools through its network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs). The NCSE also has a remit to conduct research and provide policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education matters. The views of parents are very important to the NCSE, so in autumn 2008, it commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) to survey parents of children with SEN to gather their views and explore their experiences of the support provided to their child. This document is a summary of some of the key findings from this research and the full report is available on the NCSE's website - www.ncse.ie

Who took part in this research?

In order to explore the views of parents about the support provided to their child with SEN, staff from PwC spoke to a number of parents through interviews and focus groups. The findings from these interviews and focus groups and a review of the literature were then used to develop a questionnaire. The questionnaire was posted to over 7,000 parents of children with SEN in receipt of supports and around 1,400 parents replied from across Ireland.

What did we ask parents?

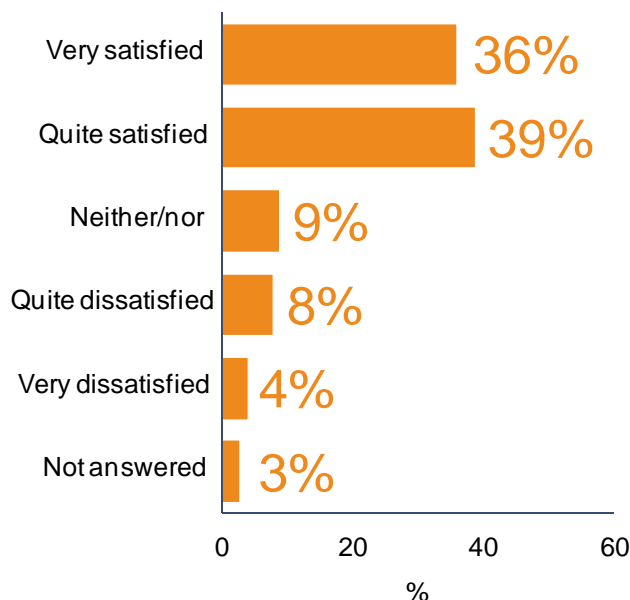
The questionnaire included important questions on topics such as:

- 1 Access to school
- 2 Assessment of their child's needs
- 3 School policy and resources
- 4 The relationship between parents and schools and parents and SENOs
- 5 Overall satisfaction with the support given to their child

What did parents tell us?

Overall, parents were generally satisfied with the support that their child's school gave to their family with three quarters (75%) of the parents that responded to the survey saying that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. But some parents identified problems with the support that they received, particularly around access to Special Needs Assistants. Parents were less satisfied with the process of applying for supports or resources for their child.

Overall, how satisfied are you with the ways your child's special educational needs are met by his or her school?



Parents Views: Summary of NCSE Research Findings



Access to school...

Nearly all (87%) parents thought that their child was in the right type of school for their needs. The main reason for this is that they felt the teacher understood the needs of their child. Most parents (68%) thought that finding a school place for their child was easy but quite a large minority thought that it was difficult (20%). Physical access to schools was generally thought to be good (61% of parents thought that it was good compared to 7% who thought it was poor). However, parents' views on access are likely to be determined by the specific type of their child's special educational need.

The assessment process...

Most parents who took part in the survey said that their child had been formally assessed (94%) and most said they were satisfied with the process (78%). Parents of children with physical or sensory disabilities tended to be more satisfied than those parents with some form of learning disability but this might be because these parents were also more likely to report that their child was assessed at an earlier age. Some parents were concerned with the length of time it took to get an assessment while others said that there could be better communication between education and health professionals.

“ Our son was attending CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] and they couldn't identify his depression even when I was telling them about it. I was phoning the educational psychologists and they were talking about the Occupational Therapist and the CAMHS people. Meanwhile my son was missing lots of school while no-one was seeing him for two months. I was asking them 'who's coordinating all these different people?' and no-one would take responsibility and what I eventually realised was it's the mother that has to coordinate all this. ”

Parent – focus group participant

Parents Views: Summary of NCSE Research Findings

School policy on SEN and resources...

The most common type of support provided in schools to the participating parents' children was special needs/resource teaching hours followed by Special Needs Assistants.

In our survey, parents were less satisfied about the process of applying for supports and resources with nearly half (45%) saying the process was difficult. Indeed, this was the area of provision that was least satisfactory for parents. Particular difficulties were identified around accessing assessments and services from appropriate health professionals like psychologists and speech and language therapists. Many parents who found the process easy said that this was because of the help and support that the school had given them.

Overall, parents were satisfied with other aspects of school policy and support such as teachers' understanding of their child's needs (70%) and the way in which the school welcomed their child (92%). This was particularly the case for parents with children at primary schools. Some parents were worried about the potential impact of the economic downturn on future provision of support for SEN.

The relationship between parents and schools...

Most parents (79%) thought that what their child was learning was appropriate to their needs and that their child was making good progress at school (78%). Good communication between the school and parents was described by parents as particularly important and most (76%) thought that their child's school welcomed their views as parents.

Awareness of the work of the SENOs...

About a third of parents (36%) had met or spoken to the SENO for their area but around half (51%) were not very aware of the work that a SENO does. Several parents suggested that they would like more contact with the SENO for their school. Given that there are approximately 80 SENOs in post across Ireland, however, it is unlikely that SENOs will have had an opportunity to meet all the parents under their remit.



Parents Views: Summary of NCSE Research Findings

“ The school she attends is where her friends go, socially this is most important and they have supported her over the years through national school. She knows she has a learning difficulty but gets on with life. Support and reassurance would be very important and the school has a wonderful community ethos. ”

Parent – survey respondent

Parents' overall satisfaction with the support given to their child...

Three quarters (75%) of parents who took part in our survey were satisfied with the support that their child receives. Just over one in ten parents were dissatisfied and parents of children in secondary schools tended to be less satisfied with the support compared to those with children in primary or special schools.

Satisfied parents said the main reason that they were satisfied was because the school staff were supportive while the main reason provided by dissatisfied parents was that they were not satisfied with the way that their child is being taught. There was a link between parents' experience of the assessment process and their overall level of satisfaction with the support provided to their child. Parents who were dissatisfied with the assessment process tended to be more dissatisfied overall.

What happens next?

The NCSE is very grateful to all the parents who took part in this research. We are now looking at the findings from the survey to see how we can develop the support we provide to parents and children with SEN.

What did we learn?

- Overall, satisfaction with the support provided to children with SEN is good but there is room for improvement
- The process of applying for support could be improved
- Good communication between schools and the family is very important
- Parents value supportive school staff who have a deep understanding of their child's needs
- Opportunities for children to make friends and socialise are also important to parents
- Parents would welcome more information and help in general – and particularly as their child moves from primary to secondary school
- Parents are not really aware of the remit of SENOs and would like more information on their role
- There could be more co-operation between education and health professionals – particularly at the assessment stage

A common theme from this research is the need for better information for parents and NCSE is working to improve the quality of the information and guidance available to parents through:

- Improving information on our website: www.ncse.ie
- Developing an information booklet for parents

Please visit our website for further information.