

Policy Submission

Submission on the Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004

2006



SUBMISSION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EDUCATION FOR PERSONS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ACT, 2004

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Q10 What is your interest in making this submission?

Combat Poverty is a state advisory agency developing and promoting evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty in Ireland. It works for a poverty-free Ireland through application of its statutory functions of policy advice, research, project support, innovation and evaluation, and public education.

Educational disadvantage is a key concern of Combat Poverty's. People with disabilities and special educational needs have been shown to experience educational disadvantage, which is understood as a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers.

The factors causing educational disadvantage are complex and often there are inter-related factors. However, it is known that one of the factors is the failure of the education system to adequately address the needs of minority groups, such as people with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

The consequences of educational disadvantage are far-reaching, as education and related qualifications determine to a large extent the life

chances of people. Those who leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications are at a disadvantage. Their personal and social development is curtailed and they are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion.

People with disabilities have fewer education qualifications than non-disabled people in their age group. This leads to double disadvantage, where economic prospects are reduced by both disability status and by lower levels of education.

The link between disability and low levels of education is a reflection of lower levels of investment in the past and a high drop out rate of early school leaving by young people with a disability. Increasing their participation must be a priority.

GENERAL VIEWS

In response to your call for submissions Combat Poverty wishes to offer some general views based on its own work, and also in relation to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy, more recently articulated through the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005, contains the overall target:

To reduce the numbers of those who are “consistently poor” below 2% and, if possible, eliminate consistent poverty, under the current definition of consistent poverty. Specific attention will be paid to particular vulnerable groups in pursuit of this objective.

Children with special needs would fall within this categorisation of vulnerable groups.

Currently, the level of consistent poverty for the population is 6.8%, for children 9.9% and for people with who are ill and/or disabled 21.7%. A figure is not available for the level of consistent poverty among children with special educational needs but from the preceding information children and people with disabilities have a comparatively high risk of consistent poverty.

Other relevant anti-poverty targets are:

To half the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006; and

To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent will reach 90% by 2006.

To increase participation by students with disabilities at third level to 1.8% by 2006.

Analysis of available information to date shows that while progress has been made on these targets, more remains to be done to achieve them. Thus, the implementation of the EPSEN Act needs to keep a focus is on addressing the needs of children at risk of poverty and exclusion.

One way of doing this is to ensure that the implementation of measures are “poverty proofed” ie. assessed for their impact on children in poverty or at risk of poverty. Further details on poverty impact assessment can be found at www.socialinclusion.ie.

Q1. In relation to the key areas of the EPSEN Act, the critical areas we believe which need to be addressed are:

- To ensure that children with special educational needs have a right to an adequate education;
- To promote and ensure an inclusive education system;
- To have an early identification and assessment of need, followed by early intervention;
- The preparation of school plans, which take into account the needs of children with special educational needs;
- A focus on the whole child, requiring the integration of systems of support;
- The provision of a continuum of supports and resources for children with special educational needs; and
- Supports for the family and wider community.

Q2. Priorities in the Implementation Phase

- The provision of more specialist educational support services for children with special needs to enable their participation in mainstream schools eg. More trained special needs assistants, psychological services, particularly in rural and urban disadvantaged areas;
- The implementation of appropriate support mechanisms eg. speech therapy, tailored academic curriculum, to support the different learning abilities of students;
- The development of an individual learning plan for children in education reflective of their individual skills;

- The development of a system whereby educational resources and supports follow the learner, rather than being tied to a particular cycle or programme of education;
- Disability awareness and poverty awareness training for teachers and service providers;
- Greater inter-agency co-operation in the design and delivery of services; and
- Income supports for families of children with special educational needs, where these are required.

Supporting evidence for identification of these issues and priorities

These issues and priorities are based on Combat Poverty's work to date, as well as the recent consultation carried out by the Office for Social Inclusion in preparation of the next National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2006-2008, (NAP/inclusion).

This consultation exercise included analysis of 81 written submissions and the views of over 500 people who attended 7 regional consultation seminars through-out the country. The results of this work have been published in Office for Social Inclusion, 2006, *Report on the Consultation for the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2006-2008*.

www.socialinclusion.ie

Some of the key points emerging from the consultation, relevant to the implementation of the EPSEN Act, and not noted above, are:

What is working well:

- *Individual learning plans developed by educational psychologists for disabled children;*
- *Tailored curricula for children with special needs;*
- *The increase in the number of resource and special needs teachers; and*
- *Commitment to supporting the participation and integration of children with disabilities and special needs in mainstream education.*

What is not working:

- *Despite some improvements, there remain major gaps in the provision of educational resources and supports for children with disabilities and special needs within mainstream education.*

- *There is a lack of specialist educational support services and diagnosis and assessment services for children with behavioural and learning difficulties. This was particularly the case in rural areas.*

How should things be done better:

- *The provision of additional resources such as specialist education services, supports with the cost of schooling etc to enable the participation of children from disadvantaged and low-income families, or those with special needs, in primary and secondary level schooling;*
- *Link the Department of Education and Science's Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools Action Plan with the Special Initiative to assist vulnerable children and their families;*
- *Additional resources for, and expansion of, existing specialist measures to support the participation of people with disabilities undertaking education and training courses in mainstream settings;*
- *Greater provision of educational supports for disabled children and children with behavioural and learning difficulties;*
- *Outreach programmes and services are needed to identify and support children with mild learning disabilities;*
- *Provide more resources to support the Grant Scheme for Resource Teachers and Special Needs Assistants to support the participation of children with disabilities in primary and second level education; and*
- *The development of specific programmes, in line with international models of best practice, to encourage and enable children with disabilities in the transition from second level to third level education.*