An Comhchoiste um Nithe a Bhaineann le Michumas

Tuarascáil maidir le hOideachas Uilechuimsitheach do Dhaoine Faoi Mhíchumas

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Joint Committee on Disability Matters

Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities

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Cathaoirleach's Foreword

The Joint Committee on Disability Matters is pleased to present this Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities, prepared following an extensive programme of engagement in 2025. The Committee undertook this work conscious of Ireland's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), particularly Article 24, which guarantees the right of every person with a disability to education on an equal basis with others and within an inclusive education system.

The Committee also notes Ireland's commitments under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which requires States to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. These obligations provide the international human rights foundation for this Report.

The contributions received by the Committee highlighted both the progress made in recent years and the persistent barriers that many children and young people with disabilities face when accessing education.

Many witnesses spoke of the dedication and commitment of teachers, SNAs, therapists and principals who consistently strive to meet the needs of children, often in the face of structural challenges. However, the evidence also demonstrates that Ireland now requires a more coherent, integrated and rights-based approach to inclusive education — one that is fully aligned with the UNCRPD and guided by the lived experience of disabled people.

This Report offers a comprehensive set of findings and recommendations, grounded in evidence, which aim to support Government in developing a truly inclusive education system for all learners.

I want to draw particular attention to the case study of Corpus Christi Primary School in Moyross, Limerick City, which is included in this Report. It stands out as one of the most compelling examples of how inclusive education can be successfully implemented in a high-need setting where strong leadership, well-defined structures and collaborative practice are embedded across the school community.

I would like to thank all the stakeholders who made submissions to the Committee for their valuable engagement. Thank you to Committee Members for all of their hard work. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Committee Secretariat in preparing this report.

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Maurice Quinlivan TD

Cathaoirleach to the Committee

Recommendations

The Committee's recommendations arise from the evidence presented in submissions and public hearings, as well as analysis of Ireland's obligations under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, and domestic legislation and policy.

Recommendations are grouped into thematic areas, consistent with the UNCRPD and international best practice.

Legislative and Strategic Reform

1. Modernise and align the legislative framework governing inclusive education with Article 24 of the UNCRPD, including updating or replacing elements of existing legislation that do not reflect a rights-based, needs-led approach.
2. Implement a national inclusive education action plan, aligned with the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) Statement of Strategy 2025–2028, with measurable deliverables.
3. Establish a formal cross-departmental governance structure to coordinate inclusive education service delivery, drawing on the strategic role of the Disability Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and ensuring operational coordination between relevant bodies.

Needs-Based Supports and Assessments

4. Transition all education support pathways from diagnosis-dependent access to a functional, needs-based model.
5. Develop a national functional needs assessment framework for education.
6. Ensure children receive provisional or interim supports while awaiting assessment or therapy services.

Access to SLT, OT, Psychology, AAC and Behaviour Supports

7. Develop a multi-annual national workforce plan addressing shortages in therapy and psychology services.
8. Expand the In-School Therapy Model nationally.
9. Strengthen Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) assessment and follow-up services.

10. Ensure all behaviour support is based on evidence-based frameworks.

Communication Rights and Irish Sign Language (ISL)

11. Fully implement the I S L Act 2017 within the education system, ensuring ISL-fluent teaching and learning supports.
12. Ensure early access to ISL for Deaf children and their families.
13. Ensure all assessments for Deaf learners are conducted by professionals with ISL competence or supported by qualified interpreters.

Inclusive Teaching and Curriculum

14. Embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) across teacher education.
15. Ensure the provision of appropriate and timely reasonable accommodations across all school settings.
16. Address workforce gaps by increasing recruitment and training pathways for ISL-fluent teachers, interpreters, teachers of the Deaf, and teachers with disabilities.
17. Ensure behavioural, sensory and emotional regulation supports in mainstream settings.

Reduced Timetables and Exclusion

18. Consider putting the existing guidelines for schools on the recording and notification of the use of reduced timetables on a statutory footing to ensure reduced timetables are used only as a short-term, exceptional measure, linked to clear support plans, and to ensure compliance.[1]
19. Incorporate data on the number of students on a reduced timetable into statutory Schools Annual Attendance Report (AAR).

Early Years Inclusion and Transitions

20. Expand early intervention supports, particularly for children with disabilities aged 0-3, to prevent development and educational disadvantage.
21. Strengthen transition pathways between Early Years, Primary and Post-Primary.
22. Increase consistency in early childhood assessments and their alignment with education planning requirements.

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[1] Department of Education and Youth, 'Guidelines for the use of Reduced School Days in Schools', 2021. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/guidelines-for-the-use-of-reduced-school-days-in-schools/

Interagency Coordination

23. Establish formal protocols for information-sharing and joint planning between schools, Children Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Tusla and early years services.
24. Consider establishing integrated regional planning structures across education, disability and health services to ensure coherent support pathways.

Data and Monitoring

25. Develop a national disability-disaggregated data system to track participation, attendance, reduced timetables, and access to supports.
26. Publish annual inclusion performance reports.
27. Monitor and publish waiting times for speech and language therapists (SLT), occupational therapists (OT), psychology and AAC services relevant to education.

Governance and Funding

28. Introduce multi-year funding for schools to support consistent and sustained implementation of inclusive practices.
29. Expand professional development and leadership programmes to support inclusive school leadership.

Wellbeing, Family Support and Mental Health

30. Strengthen the availability of school-based mental health supports, including access to sensory and nurture rooms as well as psychology and therapeutic input for emotional regulation and social inclusion.
31. Expand evidence-based family support programmes to assist parents and caregivers in navigating the education, disability and health systems.
32. Promote whole-school wellbeing frameworks that explicitly include disabled learners and ensure that mental health supports are accessible, trauma-informed and culturally and linguistically appropriate.
33. Enhance cross-agency coordination to ensure that children with disabilities and their families experience clear pathways to early intervention, mental health services, and community-based supports.

Introduction

Inclusive education is a core human rights obligation under Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which Ireland ratified in 2018.[2] Article 24 requires that all learners with disabilities can access an inclusive, high-quality education system, with appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations, and without discrimination. Ireland is also committed to the SDGs, particularly SDG 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all.[3]

These international commitments provide the framework within which Ireland's education system must operate. However, the legislative and policy environment governing inclusive education remains complex. The Education Act 1998, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, the Disability Act 2005, the ISL Act 2017, and the Education Act 2022 each establish elements of educational entitlement, but they predate or only partially reflect Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD. Gaps remain in areas such as needs-based access to supports, early intervention, and communication rights.

National policy has evolved considerably, with initiatives such as the Special Education Teacher (SET) model, Special Needs Assistant (SNA) supports, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in early years education, the emerging In-School Therapy Model, and reviews of the EPSEN Act and ISL Scheme. These initiatives assist in supporting inclusive education for people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Despite these developments, evidence presented to the Committee shows that service provision across education, health and disability supports remains fragmented, and that access to necessary supports can vary significantly between regions, schools and individual disabled learners.

Ireland continues to operate a mixed system of mainstream, special class and special school provision. While many learners benefit from specialist settings, the expansion of segregated provision, together with persistent delays in therapeutic intervention and the continued use of diagnosis as a gateway to educational supports, highlight the need for a more coherent, rights-based approach consistent with Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

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[2] United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', Article 24. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities
[3] United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal 4. Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4

Census 2022 data underlines the scale of the challenge. Among people aged 15 and over who experienced at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty, 19 per cent had completed their education at primary level or below, compared with 10 per cent of the general population.[4] For those experiencing a long-lasting condition "to a great extent", this figure rises to 28 per cent. These disparities demonstrate that disabled people in Ireland remain significantly less likely to progress beyond primary education and highlight the importance of a coherent, rights-based inclusive education system.

Student wellbeing and mental health emerged as foundational elements of inclusive practice throughout the evidence received. Witnesses emphasised that children's ability to learn and engage meaningfully in school is closely linked to emotional regulation, psychological safety, and access to timely therapeutic supports. Representatives from Corpus Christi and St. James' Primary Schools described how proactive wellbeing supports helped sustain inclusion for students with complex needs. Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) and Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) highlighted that psychological wellbeing is inseparable from educational access under Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

International guidance reinforces this emphasis on wellbeing. Policy guidelines developed by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on inclusive implementation of the SDGs highlight that accessible, community-based mental health and rehabilitation services are essential conditions for inclusive education and must be integrated with mainstream schooling from the earliest stages of life.[5] Similarly, global analysis on the state of inclusion in education underlines that jurisdictions with the strongest inclusive outcomes invest early in holistic, multidisciplinary supports that address social, emotional and behavioural needs alongside academic learning.[6]

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[4] Central Statistics Office, 'Census of Population 2022: Profile 4 - Disability, Health and Carers'. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/censusofpopulation2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/disabilityandeverydayliving/
[5] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Sustainable Development Goals: Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3)'. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Disability/SDG-CRPD-Resource/policy-guideline-good-health.pdf
[6] Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education, 'Global State of Inclusion in Education: A Letter, an Invitation and a Challenge', 2023. Available at: https://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/Global-State-of-Inclusion-Letter.pdf

This Report draws on written submissions, public hearings, supplementary documentation and research to assess Ireland's progress toward an inclusive education system and to identify the reforms required to achieve full alignment with the UNCRPD and SDG 4.

Legislative and Policy Context

Ireland's framework for inclusive education is shaped by a combination of domestic legislation, national policy, and international human rights commitments. While progress has been made over the past decade, submissions and oral evidence indicate that discrepancies remain between the State's obligations and the current reality for many disabled learners.

Ireland's Legislative Framework

Ireland's education and disability legislative framework spans several core statutes, each of which plays an important role but collectively leaves gaps that affect the realisation of inclusive education.

The **Education Act 1998** establishes the general functions of schools and boards of management, including obligations to provide education appropriate to individual needs. However, as noted in submissions from the National Disability Authority (NDA) and several Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs), the Act predates the UNCRPD and does not explicitly require inclusive education, nor does it clearly articulate the rights of disabled learners in line with Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

The **Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022** strengthened the State's ability to ensure school places for children with special educational needs by granting the Minister enhanced powers to direct schools to open special classes. While this legislation has improved capacity planning, several submissions, including those from the NDA and Inclusion Ireland, noted that it does not address broader rights under Article 24, such as access to inclusive supports in mainstream settings, early intervention, or communication rights. Its focus on placement rather than inclusive participation highlights the continuing need for a comprehensive legislative framework for inclusive education.

The Committee notes that, because the 2022 provisions are relatively recent, published data on the number of directions issued under the revised regime remain limited.

Experience under the previous mechanism, section 37A of the Education Act 1998, indicates that such powers have been used sparingly: parliamentary records and oversight reports suggest that section 37A directions were formally invoked on only two occasions to secure additional special class places where local provision was insufficient.[7] More recent analysis by the Ombudsman for Children's Office emphasises that, while strengthened legal powers can assist in addressing acute shortages, they are not a substitute for long-term, needs-based planning of inclusive provision.[8]

The **EPSEN Act 2004** was intended to provide a comprehensive statutory framework for supporting children with special educational needs, including the right to individual educational plans (IEPs), statutory assessments, and clear coordination mechanisms. Yet, as repeatedly highlighted in submissions from AsIAm, PSI, NDA, and Inclusion Ireland, and acknowledged by the DEY at the Committee's meeting on 17th September 2025, important provisions of the Act have never been commenced. As a result, rights that were envisaged 20 years ago remain unavailable in law.

Many stakeholders urged the Committee to recommend a comprehensive modernisation or replacement of the Act, aligning it fully with the UNCRPD's rights-based model. The NDA noted in its submission that the EPSEN framework reflects a medicalised, deficit-oriented approach that is inconsistent with Article 24, which requires a shift toward a relational, universal design and support-based model of inclusion.

The **Disability Act 2005** provides for an Assessment of Need (AON) process which identifies a child's health and educational needs, and the services required to meet these needs. However, according to evidence provided by multiple stakeholders, the AON has become a de facto gateway to educational supports despite not being designed for that purpose. The Committee heard that children who do not have an AON, or whose assessment is delayed, often experience delays in accessing school-based supports.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) clarified in its submission to the Committee that:

- AON identifies broad service needs but does not diagnose conditions;

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[7] Special Educational Needs, Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday 25 April 2023. Available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-04-25/247/#:~:text=For%20the%202023/2024%20school%20year%2C%20the%20NCSE%20have%20also,www.gov.ie

[8] Ombudsman for Children's Office, 'Two Years On - Plan for Places: Progress Update on Forward Planning for the Provision of Schools Places for Children with Special Educational Needs', 2024. Available at: https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2024/09/OCO-Plan-for-Places-030924.pdf

- Despite this, many school pathways require diagnosis to access supports;
- This creates delays and inequity.

This results in inequity and contradicts best practice internationally, where education supports are typically provided based on functional need rather than diagnostic confirmation.

The **ISL Act 2017** formally recognises ISL as an official language of the State and provides for its use in public services.

Evidence from the Irish Deaf Society (IDS) indicated that, although the Act should guarantee the right of Deaf children to access education through ISL, this has not been adequately implemented. The IDS emphasised that implementation gaps persist, including:

- inadequate availability of ISL-fluent teachers;
- inconsistent access to ISL interpretation;
- lack of ISL-competent assessment pathways;
- insufficient early ISL exposure.

This is in direct conflict with both the ISL Act and Article 24(3)(b) UNCRPD, which recognises the right of Deaf learners to bilingual education.

International Human Rights Obligations — UNCRPD and SDG 4

Ireland ratified the UNCRPD in 2018, thereby assuming obligations to ensure an inclusive education system at every level. This Report is framed by Article 24, which requires States to ensure:

- No person with a disability is excluded from the general education system.
- Reasonable accommodations are provided.
- Supports are delivered within mainstream schools to facilitate effective education.
- Teachers and staff receive training in inclusive methods and disability awareness.
- Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners are provided with bilingual education in sign language and written/spoken language.
- Persons with disabilities can access vocational and higher education.

The Committee heard repeatedly that Ireland remains only partially aligned with Article 24. Witnesses described a system in which children with disabilities still experience exclusion, reduced timetables, and delays accessing supports.

Ireland is also committed to achieving the SDGs. SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all, is the most relevant. Evidence throughout this Report demonstrates that achieving SDG 4 requires structural transformation of Ireland's education system, enhanced cross-departmental coordination, and strengthened investment in inclusive practices.

Evidence presented to the Committee demonstrates that Ireland continues to operate a system that only partially reflects Article 24 of the UNCRPD. Persistent reliance on diagnosis, delays in supports, and limited access to communication and therapeutic services continue to result in exclusion and reduced participation.

European monitoring also points to continuing gaps. Recent EU disability equality reporting notes that people with disabilities in Ireland continue to experience lower educational attainment and higher risks of poverty than the general population, despite policy commitments to inclusion.[9]

National Policy Context

The Committee received evidence on several ongoing policy initiatives.

The **Review of the EPSEN Act**, conducted by DEY, is intended to modernise and bring the Act into alignment with the UNCRPD. Witnesses emphasised that reform must move beyond technical amendment and should involve deep structural change.

Actions in the **Education Plan 2025**, published by DEY in June 2025, include the establishment of the new Education Therapy Service (ETS) which will see therapists working in special schools in the next school year.[10] The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will commence work with an aim to provide 90 therapists to work in 45 special schools in the next school year. The new posts will be initially for occupational

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[9] European Commission, 'European Semester 2022-2023: country fiche on disability equality – Ireland'. Available at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjNpNOXkoaSAxXid0EAHSVkBtEQFnoE CB4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fec.europa.eu%2Fsocial%2FBlobServlet%3FdocId%3D27057%26langId%3Den&usg=AOvV aw3LYIfroGNiMSq4HIeKhemc&opi=89978449
[10] Department of Education and Youth, 'Education Plan 2025'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/EducationPlan_Final_2006.pdf

therapists and speech and language therapists. The service will provide individualised therapeutic interventions for children who need them. The service will be provided in special schools first but will then be rolled out to mainstream schools. The plan also includes 400 new special classes in mainstream schools and the roll-out of free schoolbooks to all schools.

The DEY's **Inclusive Education for All – Statement of Strategy 2025–2028** has now been published and confirms inclusive education as the central objective for the education system, with specific commitments on transitions, school places and the rollout of the ETS in schools.

The Committee notes that workforce and leadership issues are addressed in the Government's broader **Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services**, which emphasises recruitment, retention and wellbeing in front-line public services, including education.[11] A coherent approach to inclusive education requires that these workforce initiatives explicitly address disability-inclusive practice, multidisciplinary working and the wellbeing of staff supporting disabled learners.

The Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion, Michael Moynihan T.D., highlighted the publication of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's (DCDE) **National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030**, which sets out a whole-of-Government approach to advancing the UNCRPD.[12] The Minister stated that, within this framework, DEY is developing a roadmap for inclusive education underpinned by the vision of Article 24, "of all learners being educated together irrespective of need or ability".

The Minister reported that approximately 30,500 students with more complex needs are now enrolled in special classes and special schools, representing an increase of over 12,000 students (67%) since 2020, and that around 400 new special classes and over 300 additional special school places are being provided annually. Sixteen new special schools have opened in recent years. While this reflects substantial investment in capacity,

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[11] Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 'Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services', 2024. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/action-plan-for-designing-better-public-services/

[12] Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), 'National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030', September 2025. Available at:
https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/33a36e70/National_Human_Rights_Strategy_for_Disabled_People_WEB_04.09.25.pdf

evidence from other witnesses highlighted concerns that this expansion risks entrenching a dual system rather than transforming mainstream settings.

The NDA's independent assessments of the **National Disability Inclusion Strategy** emphasise the interconnection between education, health and wellbeing outcomes, and highlight the need for coherent, cross-government implementation to deliver on UNCRPD commitments.[13]

The DCDE **Action Plan for Disability Service 2024-2026** is a plan for increasing capacity in and access to disability services.[14] The plan outlines actions for the period 2024-2026 under three key areas – providing better access to services, maximising impact of service delivery and improved planning and management through better information and systems. The Action Plan outlines government priorities for inclusive education, such as increasing the number of special classes, training more teachers in special education, expanding therapy supports in schools, and improving access to assistive technology. Progress will need to be monitored closely to make sure commitments are delivered.

In parallel, the DEY's **Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice** positions wellbeing as "a core pillar of the school experience", explicitly recognising the interdependence of emotional, social and academic development.[15] Ireland's emerging national Wellbeing Framework similarly links education, mental health and social inclusion and aligns these with progress towards the SDGs.[16] The Committee considers that these frameworks provide an important foundation for embedding holistic wellbeing supports as a core component of inclusive education.

The HSE highlighted its continued roll-out of the **In-School Therapy Demonstration Project**, praised widely in written and oral submissions for improving collaboration between schools and therapists.

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[13] National Disability Authority, 'Independent Assessment of Implementation of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy for 2022' and related indicator reports. Available at: https://nda.ie/publications/nda-independent-assessment-of-implementation-of-the-ndis

[14] Government of Ireland, 'Action Plan for Disability Services 2024–2026'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/action-plan-for-disability-services-2024-2026.pdf

[15] Government of Ireland, 'Wellbeing in Education'. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/wellbeing-in-education/

[16] Government of Ireland, 'Well-being Framework for Ireland'. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/publications/well-being-framework/

The **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)**, operating in early years settings, was referenced as a positive innovation that supports inclusion.[17] However, DCDE noted that AIM does not currently cover children under three, and the IDS argued that Deaf children lack early ISL access.

DCDE presented evidence on the **ISL Scheme Review**, which seeks to respond to longstanding concerns raised by the Deaf community. IDS argued that the current ISL Scheme's medicalised eligibility criteria contradict linguistic rights.

The Committee also notes the publication of the **National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Policy Advice on Inclusive Education**, which provides detailed recommendations on system-wide reform, including workforce development, governance, and consistency of support provision.[18] In addition, stakeholders referred to DEY's **guidelines on behaviour support and the appropriate use of restraint**, emphasising the need for consistent implementation and training across all school settings.[19]

The Committee notes in particular the departmental guidance on the use of positive, preventative approaches to behaviour in schools, and the emerging framework on restrictive practices, which emphasise safeguarding, dignity and the minimisation of physical intervention. These developments have clear implications for inclusive practice and for the protection of the rights of disabled learners.

Key Evidence

The Committee reviewed extensive written submissions, held four public hearings, and examined supplementary research.

The following section summarises the key evidence under thematic headings.

Diagnosis-Based vs Needs-Based Provision

A dominant theme emerging from evidence is the system's continued reliance on diagnosis as a prerequisite for accessing educational supports. IASW put forward at the meeting on

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[17] Access & Inclusion Model: https://aim.gov.ie/

[18] National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society: Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes', 2024. Available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf

[19] Department of Education and Youth, 'Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations: Guidelines for Schools in Supporting Students', 2024. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/understanding-behaviours-of-concern-and-responding-to-crisis-situations.pdf

1st October 2025 that families feel "forced to pursue diagnosis purely to access school supports."

The AsIAm submission described diagnosis-based gatekeeping as one of the most significant barriers facing autistic learners.

The PSI explained in its submission that diagnostic assessments are often "administratively, rather than clinically, driven." That is, assessments are sought not to inform clinical planning, but to unlock educational supports. This results in bottlenecks, long hospital waiting lists, and significant inequity between families who can afford private assessment and those who cannot.

The NDA submission highlighted that reliance on diagnosis contradicts Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which requires States to provide supports based on individual need, not diagnosis.

Other jurisdictions, including Portugal, Italy and New Brunswick, allocate supports using a functional needs-based model. These systems do not require medicalised diagnostic evidence before supports are provided.

Evidence from the IASW, PSI and HSE highlighted persistent challenges with the statutory AON process. Witnesses explained that, while the AON is legally required under the Disability Act 2005, it often does not provide functional, educationally relevant information.[20] Principals of Corpus Christi and St. James' Primary Schools similarly noted that AON reports frequently lack practical guidance for classroom planning, further contributing to delays in accessing the supports needed.

Access to Supports and Services

A second major theme across submissions and oral evidence was significant difficulty accessing essential supports required for effective participation in education.

Submissions from the HSE, Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT), PSI and Inclusion Ireland highlighted long delays and workforce shortages in:

- Speech and Language Therapy (SLT)

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[20] In this context, "functional" refers to information about a child's communication, learning, emotional regulation and participation in school, rather than diagnostic classification alone.

- Occupational Therapy (OT)
- Psychology
- Behaviour support
- AAC assessments and device provision
- Access to ISL supports
- Early intervention services

The HSE submission acknowledged substantial and persistent staffing shortages across CDNTs. Long waiting periods for assessments and frequent turnover in assigned professionals are problematic as this instability directly impacts schools that rely on guidance from therapists to design effective support plans. IASLT reported "critical levels" of SLT vacancies, and the PSI emphasised that demand for psychological services "far exceeds current capacity."

These delays and discontinuities in therapeutic input have direct consequences for children's wellbeing. International evidence indicates that long waits for core therapies are associated with increased school avoidance, heightened anxiety and poorer long-term educational outcomes for disabled learners.[21] This reinforces the importance of timely, school-linked therapeutic provision as a central component of inclusive education rather than an adjunct service.

During the meeting on 24th September 2025, Tiernan O'Neill, Principal of Corpus Christi Primary School, described how the school has students "who have been waiting well over a year for therapy input." Such delays cause regression and increased pressure on schools.

At the meeting on 1st October 2025, the PSI described NEPS capacity as "far below international norms," noting that Ireland's psychologist-to-student ratio lags significantly behind comparable countries. NEPS is therefore unable to provide consistent early intervention, preventative support, or timely psychological assessments. Schools often wait months before an assessment can even be scheduled.

Positive evidence was provided regarding the In-School Therapy Demonstration Project, with the PSI, AsIAm and the HSE all highlighting improved outcomes when multidisciplinary

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[21] Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education, 'lobal State
of Inclusion in Education: A Review of the Literature', 2023. Available at: https://www.inclusive-education-initiative.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/108_Global%20State%20of%20Inclusion_Policy%20Brief_V21.pdf

teams work directly with schools. Teachers benefit from immediate access to therapists; children with disabilities receive earlier intervention; and schools build their own capacity. Many stakeholders called for this model to be expanded nationwide.

The Committee notes that the NDA has included the in-school therapy model within its broader work on disability services reform and indicated that systematic evaluation of such pilots will be important to inform future national roll-out.[22] The Committee supports the completion and publication of independent evaluations of in-school therapy initiatives, with a particular focus on outcomes for students' participation and wellbeing.

In addition to highlighting challenges, both Corpus Christi Primary School and St James' Primary School provided compelling examples of inclusive practice where timely collaboration with therapists and strong whole-school approaches supported positive outcomes. Tiernan O'Neill from Corpus Christi Primary School described how embedding inclusive values across the school community enabled students with complex needs to thrive academically and socially. Similarly, Ciarán Cronin from St. James' Primary School noted that flexible problem-solving, structured routines, and close engagement with families allowed several students to re-engage successfully with full school days. These examples demonstrate that, even within a constrained system, proactive school-level leadership and multidisciplinary collaboration can deliver meaningful inclusion. School leaders also emphasised the central role of families in sustaining inclusion, noting that effective communication, joint problem-solving and access to community-based supports can significantly reduce stress on both disabled students and the staff.

Research in inclusive systems internationally, such as Portugal and New Brunswick in Canada, shows that whole-school collaborative approaches are strongly associated with improved participation and wellbeing for learners with disabilities. Portugal abolished segregated education in 2008. All children attend mainstream schools with needs-based support provided by multidisciplinary school-based teams. Supports are assigned based on functional assessments, not diagnosis.[23] New Brunswick operates a "no segregation"

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[22] NDA, 'Review of the Children's Disability Network Team Service Model '. Available at: https://nda.ie/transforming-disability-services/progressing-disability-services-for-children
[23] https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/portugal/legislation-and-policy

model: all students attend their neighbourhood schools, and individual support plans are mandatory. Inclusive education is seen as central to social cohesion.[24]

The NDA highlighted to the Committee the importance of co-ordinated, child-centred approaches to inclusive education. The NDA note that Finland prioritises early identification of need, structured transition planning between pre-school and primary school, and flexible decisions on school starting age based on individual readiness. It also reports that Portugal has developed multidisciplinary teams to support inclusion in mainstream settings, though sustaining these reforms has been challenged by staffing and class size pressures. These findings emphasise the need for early intervention, cross-sector collaboration and adequate resourcing to achieve inclusive education in practice.

International analysis, including the Global State of Inclusion Policy Brief from the Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education, highlights that jurisdictions with the strongest inclusive education outcomes share common characteristics: early investment in multidisciplinary support, needs-based resourcing models, clear national standards for inclusion, and embedded Universal Design for Learning (UDL).[25]

A strong holistic and wellbeing dimension emerged across submissions. PSI and IASW emphasised that unmet emotional regulation needs are a major factor in school avoidance, distressed behaviours and reduced timetables. School leaders similarly described increasing levels of anxiety among students with complex needs and highlighted that the absence of timely psychological or therapeutic support places significant pressure on teachers and SNAs. Several submissions stressed that effective inclusion requires coordinated emotional, social and behavioural support embedded within whole-school wellbeing practices.

Communication and Language Rights (including ISL)

Communication and language rights — an essential component of Article 24 UNCRPD — featured heavily in the evidence, particularly concerning Deaf learners.

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[24] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Global Education Monitoring Report, 'Inclusion and education: All Means All', 2020. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718.2022

[25] Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education, 'Global State of Inclusion in Education: A Literature Review', 2023. Available at: https://www.inclusive-education-initiative.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/108_Global%20State%20of%20Inclusion_Policy%20Brief_V21.pdf

The IDS provided detailed submissions, which highlighted that current provision falls far short of the requirements of the ISL Act 2017. Deaf children frequently:

- do not have ISL-fluent teachers
- receive interpreter support inconsistently
- experience delayed access to ISL in early childhood
- are placed in language environments that do not support bilingual development

Evidence stressed that delays in early ISL exposure can lead to language deprivation, affecting cognitive, academic and social development.

The IASLT submission highlighted long waiting times for AAC assessments and variability in device provision. IASLT also raised concerns that AAC devices are sometimes provided without sufficient follow-up.

The Committee also received evidence concerning the use of certain alternative communication or therapeutic approaches, including the Rapid Prompting Method (RPM) and other methods used in some contexts. IASLT and PSI emphasised the importance of evidence-based interventions. IASLT recommended that schools prioritise AAC, evidence-based communication supports, and SLT guidance. PSI highlighted that AAC provision remains inconsistent nationally, with varying access depending on CDNT capacity. IASLT advised caution where approaches do not have a strong established evidence base and recommended that education settings prioritise interventions supported by clinical research. While noting that some families may explore a range of supports in response to unmet needs, the Committee recognises the importance of guidance for schools to ensure that communication interventions used in educational settings are informed by best practice and professional advice. The Committee recognises that families may seek different approaches where public services are limited or delayed, and that clear professional guidance is required to support schools and families in identifying suitable methods. Examples of such therapies and resources are art-, drama-, equine-, music- and play-therapy, mindfulness and story massage, and the resourcing of schools for in-house nurture and sensory rooms. Other alternative therapies may support wellbeing but should complement, not replace, evidence-based educational approaches.

The evidence brought before the Committee demonstrates that Ireland must address significant implementation gaps if it is to meet the specific requirements of Article 24(3)(b) relating to bilingual education and linguistic identity.

Inclusive Teaching Practice, Curriculum and Assessment

The NDA stressed that UDL must be central to inclusive practice. Their submission highlighted that UDL seeks to anticipate and plan for learner diversity rather than retrofitting adjustments.

However, multiple submissions emphasised that UDL implementation is inconsistent. Teachers may lack sufficient training or structured guidance to apply UDL approaches. Submissions from Inclusion Ireland and AsIAm, along with testimony from representatives of Corpus Christi and St James' Primary Schools, stressed that a strong whole-school culture of inclusion, supported by leadership, collaborative practice and consistent expectations, is essential to enabling disabled learners to participate fully.

School leaders from Corpus Christi and St James' Primary Schools, along with submissions from PSI and IASW, also highlighted the need for clearer national expectations regarding the role of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Witnesses reported that SNAs are often required to undertake work beyond their formal remit, and that consistent national training standards are necessary to ensure that SNAs can effectively support inclusive practice.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is advancing curricular reforms that aim to embed inclusive design principles and flexibility across primary and post-primary programmes. These reforms include strengthened guidance on universal design, formative assessment, and differentiated learning pathways.[26]

Multiple submissions stressed the need for predictable and timely reasonable accommodations. This includes assistive technology, ISL interpretation, AAC supports, alternative assessment formats, and environmental adjustments. The unreliable availability and timeliness of reasonable accommodations is inconsistent with Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which requires the provision of accommodation necessary to facilitate inclusive participation.

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[26] NCCA Curriculum Online, 'Inclusion'. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/primary/primary-curriculum-toolkit/inclusion/

During the meeting on 17th September 2025, it was noted that reviews of the assistive technology scheme are ongoing, with Minister Moynihan stating efforts to move from a "diagnosis-led to a needs-based" approach.

PSI and IASW emphasised that many children require structured behavioural and emotional regulation supports. PSI called for a national behaviour support framework grounded in evidence-based practice such as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Supports (SWPBS).

Stakeholders highlighted that inclusive practice must integrate a holistic understanding of students' wellbeing. PSI and IASW stated that psychological safety, predictable routines and trauma-informed practice are central to enabling participation. Evidence suggested that without such supports, academic interventions alone are insufficient to sustain inclusion.

The Committee considers that workforce diversity, including the recruitment of teachers with disabilities as raised by the IDS submission, is also consistent with broader stakeholder calls for inclusive leadership, enhanced teacher training, and strengthened communication rights.

Reduced Timetables, Exclusion and Attendance

Concerns regarding the use of reduced timetables featured across written submissions and in oral testimony. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that reduced timetables are often used because essential supports are unavailable. At the meeting on 24th September 2025, Ciarán Cronin, Principal of St James' Primary School, described situations where shortened days were the only option left for students with disabilities whose support needs could not otherwise be met.

Tusla provided evidence showing that children with disabilities are significantly overrepresented among those placed on reduced timetables. Schools are required to notify Tusla when a reduced day is implemented, but compliance varies widely.

The Tusla submission explained that while reduced timetables may be appropriate as a short-term intervention in limited circumstances, they are often used as a default response to behavioural challenges, unmet sensory needs, anxiety, or a lack of appropriate supports.

Tusla stated that some children with disabilities remain on reduced timetables for months or even years. Submissions from Inclusion Ireland and AsIAm linked reduced timetables to

unmet needs arising from lack of therapeutic input, communication supports, or behavioural guidance.

Inclusion Ireland reported concerns from many families regarding the frequency and duration of reduced timetables, with some children with disabilities being sent home regularly without structured intervention plans.

The DEY issues guidance emphasising that reduced timetables should be used only in exceptional and time-limited circumstances, and never as a long-term arrangement.[27] The DEY confirmed that reports on the use of the reduced school days will be published every year. However, evidence from Tusla and Inclusion Ireland indicates inconsistent awareness and application of this guidance, with some children with disabilities remaining on reduced hours for extended periods without clear review mechanisms. Being physically present in school is central not only to learning but also to social development, routine, and mental health. Prolonged reduced timetables can exacerbate anxiety, erode confidence, and increase the risk of chronic non-attendance.

International guidance on SDG 3 similarly stresses that participation in community life, including education, is a key determinant of mental health and social inclusion.[28] Prolonged separation from school can therefore compound pre-existing vulnerabilities, particularly for children with disabilities who already face higher risks of social isolation.

Early Years Inclusion and Transitions

DCDE's submission highlighted the strengths of the AIM, which supports participation in early learning and care settings. However, stakeholders noted gaps. IASLT and IDS emphasised that early communication supports, including ISL and AAC, are not consistently accessible. Delays in early SLT, OT and AAC increase the level of need upon school entry.

IDS emphasised that early ISL exposure is a linguistic right and should form part of early intervention.

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[27] Department of Education and Youth, 'Guidelines for the use of Reduced School Days in Schools'. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/guidelines-for-the-use-of-reduced-school-days-in-schools/
[28] OHCHR, 'Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Sustainable Development Goals: Good Health and Well-Being'. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Disability/SDG-CRPD-Resource/policy-guideline-good-health.pdf

Minister Michael Moynihan noted that information-sharing between AIM, the Department and the education sector is fragmented, stating that the system "has been working in silos."

Submissions indicated that early years supports are significantly weaker for children with disabilities below preschool age. Without early identification and intervention, children often begin school with unmet developmental needs.

International guidance reinforces this evidence. The OHCHR's Policy Guideline on Good Health and Wellbeing emphasises that early intervention, coordinated therapeutic supports, and accessible communication environments are essential determinants of inclusive education and must begin in early childhood.[29] This aligns with stakeholder concerns that delays in early communication and developmental supports result in greater difficulties upon school entry.

The Committee notes that these findings align with international research on holistic early childhood systems, which highlights that co-located education, health and family support services are associated with better developmental and educational outcomes for disabled children.[30]

Submissions from Inclusion Ireland, AsIAm and school leaders highlighted significant difficulties at the transition to post-primary education, including a lack of continuity in supports, delayed decision-making, and inconsistencies in information-sharing between primary and post-primary schools. The NDA emphasised that transitions are a critical pressure point for disabled learners and require a formalised, coherent national process.

The Committee notes that work is underway within DEY through the Education Action Plan 2025 to develop guidance on transitions from primary to post-primary schools.[31] The Committee considers it essential that this guidance explicitly addresses transitions for disabled learners across early years, primary, post-primary and further education, and that it is developed in partnership with persons with disabilities.

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[29] United Nations Human Rights – Office of the High Commissioner, 'Policy Guidelines for Inclusive Sustainable Development Goals: Good Health and Well-Being', 2020. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Disability/SDG-CRPD-Resource/policy-guideline-good-health.pdf

[30] Inclusive Education Initiative, 'Global State of Inclusion in Education – Policy Brief', 2023. Available at: https://www.inclusive-education-initiative.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/108_Global%20State%20of%20Inclusion_Policy%20Brief_V21.pdf

[31] DEY, 'Education Plan 2025'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/EducationPlan_Final_2006.pdf

Interagency Coordination and Joined-Up Working

Fragmentation between education, health and disability services emerged as one of the most significant systemic barriers.

IASW noted on 1st October 2025 that interagency coordination remains "inconsistent and dependent on local relationships." The HSE submission similarly acknowledged structural separation between education and health supports.

School leaders also described significant administrative burdens associated with navigating multiple agencies, completing detailed documentation for supports and managing fragmented referral pathways. Principals from Corpus Christi and St James' Primary Schools noted that these administrative demands reduce the time available for instructional leadership, collaborative planning and engagement with families. Representatives supported the need for joint planning, stating that effective inclusion requires coordinated systems, not isolated efforts by schools.

At the meeting on 17th September, Minister Moynihan stated that early childhood transition information is not shared consistently, which affects planning for school entry and support allocation.

The DCDE submission argued strongly for a whole-of-government approach to inclusion, emphasising that education, health, and disability services must operate under shared frameworks.

The Committee also emphasises the importance of *co-creation* in the design, delivery and evaluation of inclusive education supports.[32] This includes meaningful participation of disabled learners, families and DPOs in decisions affecting their education, consistent with Article 4(3) UNCRPD. Multiple stakeholders noted that policies developed in partnership with those directly affected are more effective, more responsive, and more likely to support sustained inclusion.

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[32] DPO Network, 'Blueprint for Co-Creation: Position Paper No. 2', November 2025. Available at: Blueprint for Co-creation Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPO) Network

Data, Monitoring and Accountability

Reliable disability-disaggregated data is essential for policy evaluation and system planning.

The NDA submission highlighted significant gaps in:

- participation and attendance data;
- reduced timetable reporting;
- educational outcomes by disability;
- the tracking of access to supports.

At the meeting on 8th October, Aideen Hartney of the NDA stated that current data deficiencies prevent accurate assessment of Ireland's progress under Article 24.

School principals also expressed concern that data gaps make it more difficult to demonstrate need or plan inclusively. A lack of system-level data obscures disparities between schools and regions.

Some stakeholders also highlighted concerns about the accessibility and independence of complaints mechanisms in education, noting that many complaints processes remain school-based and may be difficult to navigate for disabled learners and their families. These concerns reflect wider debates about the commencement and implementation of statutory complaints provisions under education legislation and the need for disability-competent, rights-based complaint pathways.[33] While detailed consideration of complaints mechanisms falls outside the scope of this Report, the Committee notes their importance as part of a broader accountability framework for inclusive education.

Workforce and Resourcing Challenges

Submissions from the HSE, IASLT, PSI, IASW, and school representatives highlighted system-wide workforce shortages that directly affect inclusive education.

The HSE acknowledged significant SLT, OT and psychology vacancies within CDNTs. IASLT emphasised that shortages in SLT posts disrupt AAC services, early intervention, and ongoing communication support.

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[33] Oireachtas Library & Research Service (L&RS), 'School complaints: current procedures and proposed changes'. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2019/2019-01-29_l-rs-note-school-complaints-current-procedures-and-proposed-changes_en.pdf

PSI and educational psychologists raised serious concerns about NEPS staffing. At the meeting on 1st October, psychologist Anne O'Rourke noted that NEPS ratios are "far higher than in comparable jurisdictions," limiting both assessments and school consultation.

IDS submissions highlighted a shortage of Teachers of the Deaf and ISL-competent education staff. This contributes to the inconsistency in the delivery of Deaf students' communication rights.

Tiernan O'Neill, Principal of Corpus Christi Primary School, noted that some essential supports in his school rely on philanthropic funding, which he described as "not sustainable and not appropriate for a rights-based system."

Case Study: Inclusive Practice at Corpus Christi Primary School

Corpus Christi Primary School, located in Moyross, County Limerick, provides one of the strongest examples presented to the Committee of how inclusive education can be realised in a high-need context when strong leadership, clear structures and collaborative practice are embedded across the school community. Evidence from the school's Principal, Mr. Tiernan O'Neill, and Chair of the Board of Management, Dr. Lindsay Liston, demonstrated how a holistic, relationship-centred model can promote participation, wellbeing and learning for children with diverse and complex needs.

Whole-School Ethos and Leadership

In their evidence, Mr. O'Neill and Dr. Liston emphasised that Corpus Christi's inclusive ethos is grounded in the principle that every child belongs and should be educated within the class level in which they are enrolled. They stressed that this is not an aspirational statement but a day-to-day practice requiring consistency, clear expectations, and a sustained commitment by the whole staff.

Mr. O'Neill explained that the school operates a multi-layered relational and behavioural framework, centred on predictable routines, emotional regulation, co-regulation and continuous communication with families. Dr. Liston highlighted that this approach has been developed deliberately over time, drawing on evidence about how whole-school culture, leadership and trauma-informed practice shape inclusive outcomes.

This leadership model reflects national and international evidence showing that a strong whole-school ethos is a key determinant of successful inclusion, particularly in communities experiencing intergenerational disadvantage.

Holistic and Therapeutic Supports

School leaders explained that many pupils present with increasingly complex social, emotional, behavioural and communication needs. To respond effectively, the school integrates therapeutic, and wellbeing supports directly into the school environment.

Supports outlined in evidence included:

- emotional regulation and wellbeing programmes
- social communication supports
- structured sensory and occupational-therapy-informed approaches
- targeted interventions co-designed with external professionals where available

In addition, Mr. O'Neill explained that some supports are provided through initiatives such as The Sky Is The Limit, HAPPEE, and projects funded through the Economic and Social Intervention Fund under the Limerick Regeneration Programme. He stated that these externally funded supports have been essential in enabling children with disabilities to access timely interventions that are often unavailable through overstretched public systems.

Both witnesses expressed concern, however, that reliance on philanthropic or regeneration-linked funding is not sustainable or equitable, and that the withdrawal of such supports would significantly undermine the school's ability to maintain its inclusive model.

Role of Predictable Routines and Staff Collaboration

Mr. O'Neill emphasised the importance of predictable routines and consistent expectations, noting that these structures are fundamental for pupils who struggle with sensory or emotional regulation. He described how teachers, SNAs and school leaders meet regularly to review supports, adjust interventions and respond to emerging needs.

A key element of the school's model is that segregation or withdrawal is not used as a first response. Instead, pupils remain in their enrolled class level by default, with tailored supports provided through co-regulation strategies, visual tools, sensory adjustments and

structured communication approaches. Evidence from the Committee meeting on 24th September reinforced that this supports both learning and emotional stability.

Challenges with External Systems

(a) Diagnostic and Assessment Pathways

School leaders described significant challenges in accessing timely assessments through CDNTs. Mr. O'Neill explained that families in the local community may face barriers such as housing instability, low literacy or lack of transport, leading to missed appointments. These missed appointments can result in children being discharged, forcing the school to re-start referral processes. He stressed that schools should be able to flag vulnerable families so that children are not penalised by administrative systems that do not account for social complexity.

(b) Administrative Burden

Both Mr. O'Neill and Dr. Liston highlighted the substantial administrative workload placed on schools in navigating CDNT and NCSE processes, completing extensive documentation and applying for external funding streams. They emphasised that this reduces time available for instructional leadership and can create inequities, as schools with fewer administrative supports face greater difficulty sustaining inclusive practice.

(c) Space Constraints and Special Class Requirements

The Committee heard that Corpus Christi, like other DEIS schools, faces space pressures when required to open special classes. Mr. O'Neill outlined examples where essential communal or curricular spaces, such as libraries, breakfast rooms or family engagement areas, risked being repurposed. He stressed that decisions on special class provision should not inadvertently undermine broader supports that are vital to literacy development, nutrition and social wellbeing.

Behavioural and Emotional Needs

Corpus Christi provided detailed evidence on working with pupils who display distressed or crisis behaviours. School leaders explained that such behaviour is understood as a communication of unmet emotional, sensory or relational needs, and that punitive approaches are ineffective.

Strategies used by the school include:

- whole-school co-regulation frameworks
- enhanced sensory supports
- trauma-informed and attachment-aware practices
- multidisciplinary collaboration when available
- sustained work with families to support regulation and consistency

These approaches align closely with national and international evidence on the components of effective inclusive education.

Positive Outcomes and Impact

Despite operating in an area of significant socio-economic disadvantage, Corpus Christi presented compelling evidence of positive outcomes when holistic, relationship-centred systems are properly resourced.

According to the school's evidence:

- there has been a marked reduction in behavioural crises
- pupils previously experiencing school avoidance have shown improved attendance
- children with complex needs demonstrate meaningful engagement in learning
- strong trust-based partnerships with families have been developed
- pupils show improved emotional regulation where predictable routines and supports are in place

These findings echoed evidence from other witnesses, including psychologists, speech and language therapists, social workers and representatives of St. James's Primary School, who similarly emphasised the importance of stable relationships, predictability and access to therapeutic and psychological supports.

In Summary

The experience of Corpus Christi Primary School demonstrates that inclusive education is achievable, even in highly challenging contexts, when:

- wellbeing and emotional regulation are recognised as foundational
- school culture is deliberately inclusive and reflects high expectations

- leadership is collaborative, stable and responsive
- therapeutic and psychological supports are accessible and integrated
- interagency partners work effectively with schools
- schools are not left to rely on philanthropic or short-term funding for core services

At the same time, this case study clearly illustrates where systemic barriers, such as diagnostic bottlenecks, fragmented interagency processes, limited therapeutic capacity, and excessive administrative burdens, risk undermining inclusive practice, despite strong local leadership and commitment.

Given the impact demonstrated, the model implemented by Corpus Christi Primary School offers a potential model for replication under the DEIS Plus scheme as proof of concept.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is a legal and moral obligation. The Committee acknowledges the significant progress made in recent years to improve access to education for disabled learners, including expanded special education provision, enhanced investment in supports and emerging reforms to early intervention and therapeutic services. The evidence presented to the Committee reflects a system with committed educators, strong pockets of practice, and a clear policy commitment to inclusion.

However, the Committee heard that systemic features of the current framework prevent Ireland from fully realising its obligations under Article 24 of the UNCRPD and SDG 4. These include fragmentation between health and education supports, persistent workforce shortages, inconsistent access to communication and therapeutic services, delays in early intervention, and continued reliance on diagnosis as a gateway to support. These barriers contribute to reduced timetables, exclusion, school avoidance and unmet learning needs.

Stakeholders across organisations, schools and professional bodies articulated a common theme: the need to move from a parallel, diagnosis-led system to a coordinated, needs-led approach with strong early intervention, multidisciplinary collaboration, and evidence-based inclusive practice. Strengthening communication rights, particularly for Deaf learners and those requiring AAC, remains essential to ensuring participation on an equal basis with others.

The Committee concludes that implementing the recommendations in this Report, alongside the DEY Statement of Strategy 2025–2028 and the State's wider disability policy commitments, will be necessary to secure a coherent national framework for inclusive education.[34] Meaningful collaboration between Government departments, ongoing engagement with persons with disabilities, self-advocates, DPOs, and sustained investment in workforce capacity will be central to achieving an inclusive education system in which all learners are supported to participate, communicate and achieve their full potential.

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[34] 'Inclusive education for all, Department of Education and Youth Statement of Strategy 2025–2028'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE_strategy.pdf

The Committee considers that future reforms should be co-created with disabled learners, their families consistent with Article 4(3) of the UNCRPD, to ensure that policies and practices are grounded in lived experience and are responsive to diverse needs.

Appendix 1 – Submissions Received

Reference	Topic	Submitter
R - 2025 - 0241 - DIS	Inclusive Education	AsIAm
R - 2025 - 0236 - DIS	Inclusive Education	Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE)
R - 2025 - 0287 - DIS	Inclusive Education	Health Service Executive (HSE)
R - 2025 - 0343 - DIS	Inclusive Education	Irish Deaf Society (IDS)
R - 2025 - 0242 - DIS NDA	Inclusive Education	National Disability Authority (NDA)
R - 2025 - 0281 - DIS	Inclusive Education	Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)
R - 2025 - 0238 - DIS	Inclusive Education	Tusla – Child and Family Agency
R - 2025 - 0343 - DIS	Inclusive Education	IDS Submission – ISL Scheme Review
R - 2025 - 0343 - DIS	Inclusive Education	IDS Submission – Post-Primary Guidance
R - 2025 - 0343 - DIS	Inclusive Education	IDS Position Paper – Deaf Education

Appendix 2 – Public Meetings

Date	Topic	Witnesses
17th September 2025	Inclusive education for persons with disability	Department of Education and Youth • Minister Michael Moynihan, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth • Ms. Martina Mannion, Assistant Secretary General • Mr. Brendan Doody, Principal Officer • Ms. Barbara Mulhall, Principal Officer • Mr. Mark Kelly, Principal Officer
24th September 2025	Inclusive education for persons with disabilities	Inclusion Ireland • Ms. Derval McDonagh, CEO • Ms. Lucinda Murrihy, Head of Strategy and Innovation Corpus Christi Primary School • Mr. Tiernan O'Neill, Principal • Dr Lindsey Liston, Chairperson, Corpus Christi Family Centre St James' Primary School • Mr. Ciarán Cronin, Principal • Mr. Jim Shanahan, Chairperson of the Board of Management
1st October 2025	Inclusive education for persons with disability	Irish Association of Social Workers • Caroline Walker Strong, Chief Operations Officer • Ms. Aisling McGrory, Senior Social Worker & IASW Member

		Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists • Ms. Áine Lawlor, IASLT Chairperson • Ms. Claire Mortell, IASLT Professional Standards Standing Committee Ms. Anne O'Rourke, Specialist
8th October 2025	Inclusive education for persons with disability	National Disability Authority • Dr Aideen Hartney, Chief Executive • Dr Rosalyn Tamming, Head of Policy, Research and Public Affairs • Dr Gerald Craddock, Chief Officer of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design

Appendix 3 – Glossary of Terms

AAC – Augmentative and Alternative Communication

AIM – Access and Inclusion Model

AON – Assessment of Need

AT – Assistive Technology

CDNT – Children's Disability Network Team

DCDE – Department of Children, Disability and Equality

DEY – Department of Education and Youth

DPO – Disabled Persons' Organisation

EPSEN Act – Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

ISL – Irish Sign Language

MTSS – Multi-Tiered System of Supports

NDA – National Disability Authority

NEPS – National Educational Psychological Service

PSI – Psychological Society of Ireland

RPM – Rapid Prompting Method

SET – Special Education Teacher

SNA – Special Needs Assistant

UDL – Universal Design for Learning

UNCRPD – United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

SDG 4 – Sustainable Development Goal 4: Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education