

# Responding to Special Educational Needs during the Pandemic

NCSE's response to schools and parents of children with SEN



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Since the pandemic, the National Council for Special Education has altered how we work to ensure we reach teachers and parents in different ways through online and distance learning and engagement. We expect this way of working to continue into the future as we provide a more blended approach to supports to schools, students, and parents. This article outlines what we have done, our reflections and feedback on this experience to date, and our initial plans for the future.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has a number of roles, one of which is to support schools to enable students with special educational needs to achieve better outcomes. We do this through providing advice and supports to schools, and advice and professional learning to teachers. In 2019, for example, 16,511 teachers engaged in professional development and learning at NCSE seminars and whole-staff seminars. Our visiting teachers provided additional support to almost 1,300 blind or visually impaired children and 5,584 deaf or hard-of-hearing children in their homes or schools. The Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) delivered thirty-two parent information sessions to almost 630 parents. SENOs also answer any questions that parents or guardians may have and distribute the extensive range of NCSE information leaflets and booklets to them.

With the arrival of Covid-19 and the closure of all schools on 13 March, we had to very quickly reimagine our supports. This involved adapting how these supports were being delivered to parents and teachers, to ensure that children and adults with special educational needs continued to achieve success in the new circumstances. That challenge would be great, considering that over 7,900 students attend special schools and a further 8,400 attend special classes. In addition, over 167,000 students with special educational needs are supported in mainstream schools by 13,400 special education teachers.

As an organisation, we asked ourselves: What do the teachers in each of these settings need? What do these parents need? And most importantly, what do these students need?

## Direct school support

First, we looked at how we would continue to provide direct support to teachers. After the schools closed, we converted our existing in-school support service to a telephone-based

service. Teachers applied via our website, as before, and telephone support was offered whereby staff provided general advice and guidance.

In parallel, we developed a new in-school support portal for whole staff, group, and individual teachers in the school setting. This launched on 1 September, and enables schools to apply for and track their support applications online. Support arising from these applications may be delivered via telephone, email, video conference, or (in circumstances where public health advice permits) a school visit or whole-school seminar.

While this new portal was planned prior to Covid-19, it has become an especially important means by which NCSE's network of advisors can remain available to schools and teachers in the pandemic. It is anticipated that there will be greater reliance, in the short term at least, on telephone and video-conference support than was anticipated when the project was devised. This will be supported by online platforms which we have recently adopted for hosting meetings and seminars, as we continue to modernise how we work.

In addition, SENOs and visiting teachers for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, or blind or visually impaired, continue to maintain contact with schools and parents by telephone and email. For more detail, see <https://ncse.ie/school-support>.

### Teacher Professional Learning

The Covid-19 public health restrictions posed a significant challenge to maintaining the delivery of Continuing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). TPL seminars, which were designed to be delivered face to face, were cancelled, as were planned teacher support visits to schools between March and May.

As it became clear that schools would remain closed for the rest of the academic year, NCSE immediately began to develop a suite of supports for parents and teachers in response to the government's decision that provision of education should continue remotely. These resources, developed by our advisors, visiting teachers, and School Inclusion Model staff, proved very popular with parents and teachers. Three stages were identified as being key areas to support teachers, students, and, for the first time, parents and guardians:

- home learning
- summer programme
- transition back to school.

### Home learning

To facilitate this support, we created new spaces on our website containing a wide range of resources suitable for children with special educational needs. This new section was designed to support home learning and contains separate sections for teachers and parents/guardians. See: <https://ncse.ie/parent-resources>. Resources were published weekly during the closure of schools and explored topics such as:

- promoting learning and positive behaviour at home
- general support for learning
- speech, language, and communications
- occupational therapy
- visiting teacher support
- theme of the week, e.g., transitions, science, gardening
- app of the week.

User feedback on these resources was positive, being considered timely and helpful. In particular, the ‘theme of the week’ received over 16,000 hits. The Parents section of the website has received almost 30,000 hits to date. These statistics suggest that teachers and parents have been engaging with the material.

### Summer programme

The NCSE strongly supported the Department of Education and Skills’ (DES) decision to have a summer education programme this year and to extend eligibility to include students with disabilities other than a severe or profound general learning disability, or autism. This expansion provided the opportunity to around 15,000 children to take part.

“ **New spaces on our website were designed to support home learning with separate sections for teachers and parents/guardians.** ”

The summer provision is similar to what is usually known as July Provision. The scheme is available to support certain eligible children and takes place in the child’s school, their home, or a HSE-led summer programme. The summer programmes gave children an opportunity to continue or to re-engage with learning. The NCSE provided support through resources made available on our website, under two main areas: Guidance and Support for the Summer Programme, and Resources for Teachers.

The ‘Getting Back to What You Know’ suite of resources for summer provision was created by NCSE and formed part of the summer provision teaching strategies and resources collated by the NCSE and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). These resources focused on fostering resilience in this period of transition by promoting the following five principles, based on the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007):

- a sense of safety
- a sense of calm
- a sense of self-efficacy and community efficacy
- connectedness
- hope.

For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/online-resources-to-support-the-summer-programme>.

This provision was an essential tool in assisting students’ transition back into formal learning and enabling them to start recouping lost skills and knowledge. These resources, designed to support the new summer provision, had 2,741 engagements on the website since they were released on 1 July, further highlighting the value of the support provided to teachers by the NCSE.

### Transition back to school

In ordinary times, going back to school after the summer holidays can be difficult for some students, especially those with special educational needs. This is particularly the case after a longer-than-usual school closure, as occurred this year. NCSE was very conscious of the heightened need for teachers and SNAs to be supported in that process.

Working with colleagues in the DES, we developed resources and supports which included a suite for young people with complex needs, titled 'Getting Back to What We Know'. Initially designed to support the summer education programme, this resource is now being used in schools since they reopened. Many themed resource booklets for teachers were also created, including 'Promoting Positive Behaviour' and 'Rules and Routines in the Infant Classroom'. For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/resources-to-support-transitions-back-to-school>.

To date, there have been almost 5,000 hits on this section of our website: a clear demonstration of how creating dedicated webpages can greatly facilitate teachers, parents, and students in accessing the resources they need, when they need them.

**“ Human interaction is often a key component in the services we provide.**

### Delivery of Teacher Professional Learning

As soon as social distancing and other public health restrictions began to emerge, the NCSE began to plan for the online delivery of our Teacher Professional Learning external seminars. In early summer, Adobe Connect was selected as the platform on which these seminars would be delivered in the new school year. The NCSE has held a number of online seminars, including:

- five-day 'Contemporary Applied Behaviour Analysis' (C-ABA), attended by 31 teachers
- one-day 'Principals of Schools Establishing a New Class for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder', attended by 58 principals
- four morning seminars: Introduction to 'Behaviour for Learning', attended by 31 teachers
- three-day 'Organisational skills – Getting it together', attended by 22 teachers
- four-day introductory seminar to autism for teachers of newly established ASD classes, attended by 126 teachers.

The initial feedback to our online seminars has been positive. For example, 82% of participants of the 'Principals of Schools Establishing a New Class for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder' seminar rated the online experience as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

We continue to redesign what were previously face-to-face seminars for the online space. Registration for our calendar of events in term one of the new school year has opened, and we have adopted a new event management system to cater for the transition to online delivery. We continue to monitor public health guidelines, and when safe to do so we may reintroduce some face-to-face seminars for selected courses where corporeal participation is

particularly beneficial. For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/for-schools/connect-teacher-professional-learning-events-catalogue>.

### Looking back and moving forward

The NCSE, like most state agencies, responded quickly to changing needs in a time of crisis. While there has been positive feedback on how we reimagined our supports, we are keen to more thoroughly evaluate what we did, to identify what worked, what did not, and most importantly what parents, teachers, and students found beneficial. As an organisation, we plan to evaluate our initial response to the crisis more formally, and to critically analyse this evaluation so we can make informed decisions on how best to move forward with our services and supports.

There are limitations to the online space for us; human interaction is often a key component in the services we provide. We are acutely aware of these limitations and are working carefully to minimise the impact they will have on our interactions with teachers, parents, and students in the immediate future. Having said this, there are also benefits to online engagement, such as the potential for wider and greater reach. While evaluating this period of change, we will endeavour to capitalise on the opportunity it brings to have a more blended approach in the future. We will continue to try our best to support teachers, parents, and students during these uncertain times.

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### Dr Brian Mooney and Minister Simon Harris, guest speakers at Higher Options, held in Dublin in November 2020.



Higher Options is an annual three-day education expo for second level students, which takes place in Dublin and is run by *The Irish Times*. The aim is to provide a forum where second level students are assisted in making decisions about their studies by meeting directly with representatives from universities, colleges and education institutions from Ireland, the UK, Europe and beyond. This year the event was virtual.