Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth

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Theme: Inclusive Education: Allocations, Role and Training Needs of SETs and SNAs

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Cathaoirleach, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am speaking on behalf of the **Education and Training Board sector**, and I also acknowledge my role as a special education teacher educator in Mary Immaculate College, currently on secondment to ETBI.

Let me begin by acknowledging the Department of Education and Youth and the NCSE, who are responding at pace to extraordinary pressure in the system. Ireland is dealing with very significant growth in both the number of students seeking specialist placements and the complexity of need presenting across schools. The response is visible in multiple consultation and research undertakings, including the EPSEN Review, the SNA Workforce Development Plan, the engagement with the EASNIE Technical Support Instrument, the development of SET guidelines, the formation of Education Therapy Service, curricular reform across primary, special, and post primary schools, and wider consultation and reform processes.

The question we ask is: **how do we make sure increased funding, increased provision and increased policy activity translate into connected, coherent, sustainable impact at school level?** From an ETB perspective, that is where the next phase of effort now needs to focus.

Across 16 ETBs, the sector supports more than 300,000 learners annually in schools, further education and training, youth and community education. In the schools sector alone, ETBs currently include 250 post-primary schools, 33 Community National Schools, and 16 special schools, including hospital schools, with a further four special schools opening in 2026. That breadth gives the sector a practical, cross-system view of what schools may need next.

I will make seven brief points.

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1. **Recognise special schools a distinct sector.**

The system needs to recognise the uniqueness and diversity of special schools, which vary widely in size, learner profile, staffing, local supports and historical SERC and SNA arrangements. A single rigid model no longer fits. Each school requires context-sensitive supports. The current primary-designated status is increasingly misaligned, given that more than 50% of students are of post-primary age. We recommend a shift from a designation-based model to a needs-based, context-specific model, recognising each special school as a unique ecosystem.

In that context, we welcome the move towards needs-based provision across all settings and away from diagnostic gatekeeping. The current SNA/SERC model is outdated and no longer adequate for complex needs. Agencies such as NEPS, Oide, the Inspectorate, the NCSE and the HSE still operate without a shared protocol, resulting in inconsistent access to supports. Many special schools also lack specialist post-primary facilities despite the age profile of their students.

Further priorities include: strengthening teaching and learning through access to post-primary subject facilities; creating a shared national protocol for special schools across support agencies; addressing infrastructure and capital deficits, especially where schools are in temporary or retrofitted buildings; planning for tiered specialist roles such as SENCOs, SETs and HSCL teachers; and using ETB architectures to enable structured transitions to FET. Within the ETB sector work is underway to look at planning effective transitions between the levels of education within ETBs. Special schools of the future could function as regional, multidisciplinary hubs, operating within inclusive campuses and sharing specialist facilities and supports, with student need, not designation, determining provision.

2. **Capitalise on what is already showing promise**.

I want to emphasise the RISE Strategy [1]. RISE, which stands for *Realising Inclusive Special Education*, is a research and knowledge mobilisation partnership between ETBI and Mary Immaculate College and is a strong example of how collaborative, cross-sector working can build sustainable capacity for inclusive teaching and learning. Across more than 230 of the 250 ETB post-primary schools, with some cross sector engagement, it supports schools through school self-evaluation, provision mapping, leadership development, collaborative inquiry, and reflective use of data. It complements national supports rather than duplicating them, and it offers an approach that is systematic, data-informed, collaborative and scalable.

3. **Build the workforce.**

Inclusive reform succeeds where systems invest in career-long professional learning, leadership for inclusion, and collaborative support structures for teachers, school leaders, SETs, SNAs and other key personnel [2, 3]. In recent research analysing special education policies across various countries [4], the ScopeSEND study places Ireland among the jurisdictions most aligned with a needs-based, socially responsive approach, and identifies Ireland as having a

relatively strong professional learning culture. But implementation becomes difficult where systems remain fragmented or insufficiently connected.

The future priority must therefore be coherent, school-embedded, scalable capacity-building - not only external inputs, but structures that support learning in practice, in schools, over time [3]. We also welcome the SNA Workforce Development Plan, but future development must ensure that SNA allocation, role design and professional learning are increasingly aligned to student profiles and school context.

4. Develop the SENCO role more deliberately.

The SENCO role requires more deliberate development. While a welcome 2.5% ring-fenced increase in post-primary SENCO co-ordination time has been secured, it remains well below the 10% originally sought by the three management bodies. Irish research shows that SENCOs across primary and post primary sectors continue to face insufficient time, unmanageable workload, and regular work outside contracted hours, while strongly supporting the need for a dedicated leadership position in schools [5, 6, 7, 8].

Comparative European research, including Ireland, [9] sharpens that further: where the SENCO role lacks policy clarity and formal recognition, it becomes more vulnerable to inconsistency, overload and ambiguity. It argues that the SENCO role should help create coherence between classroom practice, school organisation, family engagement and wider supports. The future direction should therefore be balanced but clear: clearer role recognition, clearer expectations, stronger professional learning pathways, and positioning within team-based and distributed leadership structures.

5. Strengthen the middle layer of the system.

One of the clearest lessons across the evidence, and from research on RISE, is the importance of the mesosystem - the space between national policy and classroom practice [10]. That is where schools need support with implementation, transitions, collaborative planning, inter-professional working, leadership development and workforce capacity building. If increased investment is to deliver better outcomes, this connecting layer matters enormously.

6. **Provide protected time for whole-school implementation.**

A joint proposal from JMB, ACCS and ETBI for three half-day exceptional school closures across two school years in post-primary schools should be seen in that light. Similar dedicated time is also needed in primary and special schools. Schools are being asked to engage simultaneously with needs-led reform, increased complexity, expanding specialist provision, and curriculum change. Those reforms require whole-staff professional learning, collaborative planning, reflection and review. They cannot be implemented well through ad hoc meetings or one-off training [3].

7. Invest in communities of practice.

Communities of practice are a critical part of the capacity-building infrastructure. The evidence from RISE and from the wider research literature points in the same direction [3]. Communities of practice reduce isolation, build professional identity, support critical reflection, and help

schools and leaders develop more consistent, evidence-informed approaches to inclusive practice. In a time of rapid change, they offer a way to build system capacity collectively, not individually.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reform direction is positive, and the task now is to build the coherence that will help the Department, the NCSE and schools translate this rapid reform effort into effective practice on the ground. From an ETB perspective, that means: recognising special schools as a distinct sector, resourced appropriately; continuing the move to needs-based provision; building on RISE as an enabling architecture for coherent, scalable and data-informed inclusive school improvement; strengthening the preparation and continuous development of teachers, leaders, SETs, SNAs and SENCOs; supporting the mesosystem connecting policy and practice; investing in communities of practice; and protecting whole-staff time for planning, implementation and review.

Thank you for listening and for the opportunity to contribute to the process.

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