

Welcome

SYDNEY BLAIN, CHAIRMAN

As chairman of the Council I welcome you to our first Newsletter.

Many of you will be familiar with some of the activities of the Council. However I believe that this Newsletter, which the Council intends to publish twice a year, will serve to provide you with a greater understanding of the range of activities and the operation of the Council. Indeed, it is the Council's intention that the Newsletter will go further than that and provide opportunities for you to contribute views and articles which will reflect your experiences of the successes and difficulties encountered in relation to all aspects of the education of children with special educational needs. In this regard we will consider for publication views and articles submitted by parents, teachers and others with relevant expertise in or experience of special education.

Having read this first issue I would strongly recommend that you visit our website, www.ncse.ie, regularly for up-to-date information on our work, especially research reports, and that you will use the links to other websites with information on special education provision.



Foreword from the CEO

PAT CURTIN, CEO

About the Council The NCSE is a statutory body established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. Since our establishment 5 years ago we have concentrated on developing an organisation which provides a timely and efficient service to schools in sanctioning teaching and SNA resources to support children with special educational needs. Our local service is delivered through our national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) who interact with parents and schools and liaise with the HSE in providing resources to support children with special educational needs.

Applications for Support A major achievement in this area has been the elimination of the backlog of applications for support that existed when we were first established. We now deal with over 20,000 applications a year and deliver decisions to schools within a 6 to 8 week period. In sanctioning resources for schools we operate within Department of Education and Science policy parameters. However, in doing so our SENOs talk to schools, parents, HSE providers and other professionals before making decisions to ensure that the decision made is the best fit for the individual pupil.

Co-ordination of Education and Health services supports A key aim of the Council is to progressively improve the co-ordination between the education and health sectors in providing the supports for children with special educational needs. We are doing this

through participation in the Education/Health Cross Sectoral Group which includes representation from the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the HSE at national level and through interaction with the HSE and their service providers at local level.

Research and Policy Advice We now have a substantial research programme under way and will soon be publishing the results of the first of the projects. This research will help to inform best practice in the special education area and provide a basis for developing policy advice as appropriate.

The Future The remit of the Council will be significantly extended as the EPSEN Act 2004 is commenced. While certain sections of the Act have been commenced, the Council is disappointed that greater progress has not been made towards implementing the Act which confers statutory rights to assessment, education plans and appeals processes on children with special educational needs. However, the Council will continue to work towards achieving the ambitions of the Act in every way possible, pending its commencement.

In future issues of this Newsletter we look forward to elaborating on the various activities of the Council. ■



Contents

Council News

Council membership FAQs	2
-------------------------	---

Working with schools and parents

The Role of the SENO	3
----------------------	---

NCSE Research

Research Update	4
What is inclusive education?	5

SENO Section

Pre-school in South Tipperary	6
Reflections from a SENO	7

School Section

St Canice's, Kilkenny	8
Scoil Mhuire gan Smál, Kilsaran	10

Articles to be considered for publication and comments about the newsletter may be emailed to: newsletter@ncse.ie.

The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily endorsed by the National Council for Special Education.

Membership of the Current Council

Mr Sydney Blain (Chairperson) Principal, Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, Dublin

Mr Christy Lynch CEO KARE

Dr Seamus Hegarty Chairman of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Former Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales

Ms Siobhán Barron Director, National Disability Authority

Mr Rory O Sullivan Principal, Killester College of Further Education, Dublin

Ms Teresa Griffin Principal Officer, Special Education Section, Department of Education and Science

Mr Tom O Sullivan Assistant General Secretary, Irish National Teachers' Organisation. Former Principal of St Senan's Boys National School, Limerick

Professor Patricia Noonan Walsh NDA Professor of Disability Studies, UCD. Fellow of International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability

Maighread Ní Ghallchobhair O.P. Former principal of Benincasa School for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties

Ms Anita Dillon Special class co-ordinator in Killina Presentation Secondary School, Tullamore, County Offaly

Ms Caroline O'Brien Assistant Principal at Holy Child Secondary School, Killiney, County Dublin. Former member of the Board of Directors of the Special Olympics Ireland.

Mr Don Mahon Assistant Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Science

Mr Barry Murphy Principal Officer, Department of Health and Children



Maighread Ní Ghallachobhair O.P., Anita Dillon, and Don Mahon, Council Members



Christy Lynch, Barry Murphy, and Teresa Griffin, Council Members

FAQs

Why was the National Council for Special Education set up?

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to co-ordinate and deliver services to students with special educational needs, at a local level. It was also to undertake research, provide policy advice to the Minister for Education and disseminate information about good practice in relation to the education of children with special educational needs. In these ways, the Council facilitates the inclusion of students with special educational needs into the school system.

Does the NCSE work with parents or just with schools?

The NCSE works with all stakeholders including parents, schools, Health Service Executive (HSE), Government Departments, educational psychological services (including NEPS) and a range of other relevant agencies to ensure and help improve the standard and delivery of appropriate inclusive special education services.

In carrying out its role the NCSE is required by law to operate within the policies and budgets prescribed by the Minister for Education and Science, including policies in relation to the level of resources and the nature of services to be provided for particular categories of special educational needs.

How is NCSE governed?

The Council is responsible for the strategic direction and governance of the organisation. The current Council was appointed for a three year term from January 1st, 2007. It consists of 13 members appointed by the Minister for Education and Science from among persons who have a special interest in or knowledge relating to the education of children with special educational needs.

The role of the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)

SÉ GOULDING, HEAD OF OPERATIONS

Resourcing Schools

Since January 2005, the NCSE has been responsible for the allocation of additional teaching and SNA resources to schools in order that they can support the special educational needs of children, arising from a disability. Since then, the NCSE also provides reports to the Dept of Education & Science to assist it in making decisions in relation to applications for transport or assistive technology (more commonly known as special equipment). The NCSE manages this process through a national network of approximately 80 SENOs who are deployed

throughout the country and who allocate such resources to all schools in their district of responsibility.

The NCSE, through the SENOs, fulfils this function in line with the Government policy as set down by the Minister for Education & Science. Schools submit applications for the relevant resources to the SENO and in doing so they attach the relevant professional reports relating to the children in question (e.g. psychological reports). As a result, the SENO allocates the overall additional teaching and SNA resources to the school for each academic year, taking into account:

- the needs of the new children enrolling in the school
- the resources freed up as a result of children leaving the school e.g. progressing to a second level setting
- the ongoing needs of the children who will continue to be enrolled in the school

Each SENO district is comprised of a school cohort of approximately 10,000 pupils of whom 500–600 would have a special educational need.

Information for Parents

In general, schools provide the core information to parents on how the special educational needs of their child are met in the school setting. However, there will be occasions where parents will seek information from the SENO in relation to their role as set out above. These primarily relate to

- the level of resources to be made available to the school when their child is enrolling for the first time in primary
- issues relating to the transition of their child to a second level setting
- issues relating to the placement of their child in a special class or special school setting
- how professional reports are used and how the care needs of their child (if identified in a professional report) will be met in a school setting

SENOs can meet with parents or deal with queries over the phone if this is more convenient. In general SENOs will be out of the office and working in schools so this may impact on their capacity to meet at short notice but they will attempt to respond at the earliest possible opportunity. ■

Contact details for your local SENO may be obtained from your local school or from the NCSE website at www.ncse.ie

Main priorities for 2009

A number of areas of activity will be prioritised in 2009, as part of the Work Plan for the Council. These may be referred to in greater detail in a future newsletter.

Allocation of Resources to Schools

SENOs will continue to process applications for resources from schools so that the schools can plan to meet the needs of children with special educational needs in the 2009/10 academic year.

Commencement of Information Seminars for Schools/Parents

The NCSE intends to convene a number of information sessions for schools and parents, in which the policy and procedures

which govern the work of the Council will be outlined. It is intended that this presentation will be followed by a questions and answers session. In this regard, the position in relation to individual children would not be a subject for discussion in a public setting.

It is intended that these seminars will lead to a greater understanding of the NCSE resource allocation process while at the same time providing the Council with an opportunity to collate the views and concerns of schools and parents in a structured manner. This will in turn enable the Council to identify shortfalls in how information is provided to schools and parents and should influence what areas will require particular attention.

Further Development of Contacts with the Health Sector

The planning process for the assessment and delivery of services under the EPSEN and Disability Acts is progressing and it is intended that inter-agency contacts between the NCSE and the HSE will further develop, in particular at local level.

As a first step, the NCSE is engaged with the HSE in relation to those children under 5 years of age who have been assessed with a disability. It is intended that the development of a coherent approach will lead to an improved planning process for when these children enrol in school at primary level.

NCSE Research Update

JENNIFER DORAN, HEAD OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Research Function

One of the Council's key roles is to conduct research to provide an evidence base to support its functions. The research activities assist in the development of policy advice on special education matters and contribute to identifying and disseminating to schools, parents and other appropriate stakeholders, information relating to best practice concerning the education of children with special education needs.

The research function is staffed by Head of Research and Development, Jennifer Doran, and Research Officer, Clare Farrell. A Research and Communications Committee, which is a subcommittee of the Council supports these functions. The Committee meets approximately every six to eight weeks and is chaired by Dr Seamus Hegarty. Professor Patricia Noonan Walsh and Mr Tom O' Sullivan are also members of the Committee (one position is currently vacant). Members of the Committee meet regularly in addition to this to evaluate tenders and/or interview research applicants.

Research Framework

A strategic Research Framework for 2009-2010 that guides the research work programme was developed and agreed in 2008. It arose from the NCSE Strategy Statement 2008- 2011, priorities set out in the NCSE Implementation Plan (2006) and a public consultation process. A wide range of over one hundred stakeholders were written to and invited to make suggestions for priority research themes. In addition to this, public advertisements were placed in numerous national papers and on the NCSE's website. A total of 42 written submissions were received, one of which was supported by letters from 19 individuals.

Out of this exercise, four priority research themes emerged with a number of sub themes in each:

- 1 The experiences of children with special educational needs, and the experiences of their parents
 - a. Access to and experiences of inclusive education and the curriculum.
 - b. Outcomes for children with SEN.
- 2 Best practice/policies in provision for children with SEN
 - a. Educational planning to meet individual special educational needs.
 - b. Assessment of SEN.
 - c. Effective pedagogy and curriculum issues.
 - d. School capacity and the nature of support measures and resources.

- 3 Staff and support issues
 - a. Training and development needs of teachers, support staff and other professionals.
 - b. Collaboration and partnership working within and between education and other services.
- 4 Improved data collection
 - a. prevalence of SEN/disability.
 - b. incidence level of particular conditions.

Research Activities

2008/2009 Programme

2008 saw the start of a busy year for the research function, with a large number of research projects commissioned as follows:



Second from left, Jennifer Doran, Head of Research and Development, with Research Committee members, from left, Tom O'Sullivan, Seamus Hegarty, and Patricia Noonan Walsh

- A review of special schools and classes.
- Four international literature reviews of the evidence of best practice provision and evidenced-based outcomes in the education of pupils and students who are:
 - Deaf/Hard of hearing
 - Blind/Visually impaired
 - Autistic
 - Emotionally disturbed/behaviourally difficult
- An international literature review of the diagnostic procedures/tools used to diagnose a disability and the assessment procedures/tools used to identify the special education needs arising from the diagnosed disability.
- An assessment of the experiences of pupils with special educational needs transitioning from primary to post-primary school.

- A study to explore the application of the curriculum in mainstream primary school classes that include pupils with a variety of special education needs in junior and senior infants, 1st and 2nd classes; and access to the curriculum among those pupils.
- A national parental survey of attitudes and experiences of local and national special education services (c 1,000).
- In collaboration with the Council's Consultative Forum, a literature review on the principles and practices of inclusive education was commissioned.

2009/2010 Programme

- A longitudinal study over 3 years examining how special education is provided within Irish schools, the experiences of pupils/students with

special education needs receiving this education and their associated outcomes. This research will be extended beyond the three years pending available funding.

- A special education need/disability prevalence study incorporating a review of special education data sources.
- A review of the NCSE resource allocation process and evaluation of the deployment of resources in schools.
- An audit of SEN research conducted within Ireland since 2000.
- A transition/access study for adults with disabilities to avail of higher and further education.
- An international literature review on curriculum and curriculum access issues for students with special educational needs in post primary settings. ■

Other Activities within the Research Function

Exclusion/Expulsion of pupils with severe emotional disturbance and or behavioural difficulties

In 2008, a small interagency advisory group was established to conduct an initial exploration of the needs of children with severe emotional disturbance and/or behavioural difficulties (EDBD) who may be excluded from special schools for severe EDBD because of persistent violence that is a threat to teachers, other pupils and/or themselves. This problem had been raised by Council members and it was felt that the EBD international literature review (mentioned previously) and the

work of this advisory group might improve our understanding of the issues and contribute to an appropriate response to their needs. The work of this group continues in 2009.

Inclusive Education Framework for Schools

The research and policy functions will be working collaboratively over the coming year with a multi agency group representative of education and other stakeholders to develop an Inclusive Framework and self evaluation tool that schools can use on a voluntary basis to assess their levels of inclusiveness. This initiative arises directly out of one of the Council's five strategic priorities as

per the Strategic Statement 2008- 2011, in which one of the actions associated with the priorities is to 'establish a framework to measure levels of inclusiveness'. It also forms the next stage in the work completed in conjunction with the Consultative Forum mentioned previously.

Special Education Research Initiative (SERI)

A series of research grants were provided by the NCSE under the Special Education Research Initiative (SERI) in late 2006. Reports from these projects continue to be finalised through the standard review process and some of the reports will be placed on the Council's website once signed off.

What is inclusive education?

The following definition of inclusion was proposed by the Consultative Forum in advice given to the Council

"Inclusion is seen as a process of:

- addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and
- removing barriers within and from education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements

to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.

NB FOOTNOTE: this definition must be viewed in the context of the statutory remit of the Council as set out in the EPSEN Act"

Establishment of Pre-School Provision for Pupils Diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in South Tipperary

AISLING BACON, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ORGANISER (FORMERLY FOR SOUTH TIPPERARY, CURRENTLY FOR OFFALY)

Background Information

In September 2007 the local Special Educational Needs Organiser was contacted by the Area Coordinator for Disability Services (HSE) in South Tipperary with regard to the establishment of a designated pre-school service for pupils with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It had come to the attention of management within the HSE in South Tipperary that there were not enough places at the existing Brothers of Charity Early Development Centres for children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Scoil Aonghusa is a local Special School catering for the needs of children aged between 4-18 years who have a Moderate/Severe Profound General Learning Disability. The Board of Management of Scoil Aonghusa Special School, Cashel made an application for the establishment of a designated pre-school for pupils with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder within the categories of moderate and severe/ profound general learning disability to the local Special Educational Needs Organiser in April 2008.

Scoil Chormaic is a Special School catering for the needs of children aged between 4½-18 years who have a Mild General Learning Disability. In April 2008, the Board of Management of Scoil Chormaic Special School,

Cashel also made an application for the establishment of a designated pre-school for pupils with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder within the categories of mild/borderline mild general learning disability and above to the local Special Educational Needs Organiser.

These applications followed a series of lengthy cross-sectoral (HSE, DES & NCSE) negotiations and discussions. Two meetings were held involving the relevant stakeholders from Scoil Aonghusa Special School, Scoil Chormaic Special School, HSE Disability Services, Early Intervention Team Services, Brothers of Charity Services and the Special Educational Needs Organiser. Based on the information presented to the SENO through applications from the schools, cross-sectoral meetings, discussions with the principals of both schools, parents and relevant HSE professionals, the need for designated early intervention services for pupils with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder in the South Tipperary area was identified.

The Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) met with the Area Coordinator for Disability Services (HSE) to discuss potential applicants to the early intervention class and the delivery of HSE services to the class. The SENO sought confirmation from the Area Coordinator for Disability Services that there would be no

duplication of services for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and that the necessary HSE services would be provided to the class. Confirmation was received from the HSE that the services of the Early Intervention/Preschool Development Team would continue to be available to the cohort of children enrolled in the early intervention ASD classes for assessment, treatment and review. This service is drawn from the existing Early Intervention/Preschool Development Team so no additional strain was being placed on the existing resources allocated to the either of the special schools.

The school principals and the SENO visited the existing early intervention service at St. Joseph's Special School in Waterford City.

The National Council for Special Education allocated resources, in line with established Department of Education & Science criteria, to each of the schools to enable them to establish the new service. The standard ASD special class staffing schedule was employed for the special early intervention classes which gives a Pupil: Teacher Ratio of 6:1 and a Class:SNA Ratio of 1:2.

Aonghusa Beag

Scoil Aonghusa Special School established 'Aonghusa Beag' in September 2008. The basis for enrolment is that the child must be three

years old with a diagnosis or working diagnosis of ASD with a moderate to severe/profound General Learning Disability.

The school is particularly conscious of the fact that Aonghusa Beag is a dedicated ASD early service within a Special School. As a result parents of young children with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder are being introduced to Special Education at an early stage. The school is mindful that some parents could find it difficult to be associated with Special Education at this early stage in their child's education. Parents are informed that Aonghusa Beag is not a feeder service to Scoil Aonghusa and that the individual needs of the child are reviewed by the teaching and health professionals involved in delivering the service when it comes to the child's transition to primary education.

A pre-school curriculum is in operation with involvement from parents and therapists. Parents have made positive comments about the progress being made by their children and deem the service to be a great success. Parents are also delighted with the full five day service currently being offered to those enrolled in Aonghusa Beag.

The Board of Management of the school has stated:

“We are delighted to have such a provision and for the first time ever, to be involved from the very beginning and to be in a position to monitor progress right through from this early age.”

Scoil na n-Óg

Scoil Chormaic Special School also established ‘Scoil na n-Óg’ in September 2008. The basis for enrolment is that the child must be three years old with a diagnosis or working diagnosis of ASD with a Mild General Learning Disability, Borderline Mild General Learning Disability or above.

Scoil na n-Óg’s mission statement states that: “Scoil na n-Óg shall respond to the needs of our children by providing a safe, stable and caring environment which gives the opportunities to learn and the variety of experiences necessary,

so that each child will achieve their full potential as members of the wider society.”

In Scoil na n-Óg an eclectic teaching approach is in place to encompass the individuality and uniqueness of each child and to nurture his/her interests and abilities and support his/her needs. It is the opinion of the staff that a holistic early intervention is essential for the development of young children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, especially in the area of communication and social development. Methodologies are based on the TEACCH approach but children’s individual needs are valued and, where possible, met through elements of different interventions including PECS, ABA, Sensory Integration Therapy, Social Skills Training and Animal Assisted Therapy. Furthermore, activities as part of the eclectic

approach will include social integration opportunities, music, play, art and crafts, computers, drama and more, depending on interest and ability.

The classrooms in both schools provide a clearly structured environment with visual support systems in place which serves to enhance the independence and orientation of the pre-school children.

Going Forward

The ASD Early Intervention Services in South Tipperary have now been in operation for almost one entire academic year. There are children who will leave the services at the end of the 08/09 academic year, who have been provided with a full-time specialist ASD early intervention provision and given the

opportunity to develop their confidence, self-esteem, communication and social skills in supportive and caring environments. Some ‘graduates’ may move on to mainstream education, others may remain in the special school system but whatever path is chosen by the parents of these children it will have been in collaboration with the teachers and members of the South Tipperary Early Intervention Team health professionals.

This model of early intervention support has been made possible as a result of ongoing collaboration, communication and planning between the schools, parents, the Area Coordinator for Disability Services (HSE), the Early Intervention Team and the SENO (National Council for Special Education). Long may it continue! ■

Reflections from a SENO

MARGARET CARROLL, SENO

... on good practice observed in the inclusion of children with special educational needs in a mainstream primary class.

‘I will always remember this particular class. What was remarkable to me about the class was that it would not be obvious to the casual observer that there was any child with a disability in the class. In fact there were three students who had already been assessed as having low incidence disabilities and subsequently one further child was similarly assessed.

Was it the additional resources that the school had to cater for these students that made the difference? They had 14 hours resource teaching and the support of a fulltime Special Needs Assistant which I am sure made a difference to meeting the needs of these students. However, it seemed to me that what made this particular class excellent was more about the teacher’s attitude and experience, her planning and ability to capitalise on the student’s strengths and the dynamics she helped to develop within the class.

An example of this was when, during a (structured) free session where the students picked an activity, a child with Asperger’s Syndrome was able to play with his electronic game provided that he played it with others, took turns etc. It was really interesting to watch the chat and interactions which then took place in a very natural way. The support from the Special Needs Assistant was so discreet that the children did not appear to be aware that she was there for any particular child. As far as they were concerned she was the teacher’s

helper, not any child’s helper. While the three children had shared access to SNA support, the teacher took full control of and responsibility for the education of all the students.

While additional resources are important in the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream classes, is it not also how they are used that makes inclusion meaningful? It seems that it is often the small things that can make a big difference.’ ■

Special Class St Canice's Co-Educational National School, Kilkenny

MARIA COMERFORD, PRINCIPAL

March 7 2007 is a date etched in mind forever here in St. Canice's Co-Educational National School, Kilkenny. After months of preparation, finally, our special autism class was open, the children had arrived in school and it was all systems go.

When our SENO initially approached us to discuss setting up a unit as she had two pupils with no school placement, we thought she had chosen the wrong venue. St. Canice's is a vertical mainstream co-educational school with an enrolment of 515 students at that time. We are a vibrant, busy school where extra-curricular activities abound and hustle and bustle is the order of the day. With our limited knowledge of autism we could only picture noise-sensitive children arriving and being overwhelmed and stressed by our school environment. Aside from all this, like many other schools we are full to capacity, with constantly increasing numbers. We duly suggested "suitable alternatives".

Fortunately, the SENO did not give up and when she approached us again having failed to obtain a "suitable alternative" we began to seriously consider the idea.

First step – what would our staff think? All our initial reservations surfaced although everyone was very positive about the idea. The main concern centred on our ability to cope with this unknown venture.

Our Board of Management listened to the SENO explain what would be required and after much discussion it was agreed that with the staff willing to give it a go, the only "right" decision would be to take on this project.

This positive attitude from staff and board was the first major step towards making this initiative work.

Now the challenge – Teacher? Room? SNAs?

Having previously had an extremely stressful and unsatisfactory experience renting prefabs, we decided to investigate the possibility of using two rooms connected to the Community Hall which is situated in our school grounds. A visit to a school in Wexford with a unit housed in prefabs made us realise that these

“ This positive attitude from staff and board was the first major step towards making this initiative work ”

rooms would be more than adequate as a starting point. It is amazing what a good builder can do and within a couple of weeks glass panels, doors, and even a beam for swings and sensory equipment were in place. A coat of paint, new lino, new furniture and everything began to take shape. Over the next few months, equipment recommended by the Occupational Therapist was sanctioned and funded by the Department of Education and Science and a local furniture restorer made the padded frames for a Sensory Room.

The next major step was recruiting our wonderful teacher who came to us with experience, expertise and a genuine passion for the job. I can honestly say that it could not have happened without her. From the first official meeting we had with our new parents, SENO, and psychologist, I heard our teacher and parents connect and talk in a language I couldn't follow, and I knew that this was going to work.

Our Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) completed the "Triple A" team and what a team they have proven to be. Talented, dedicated, rarely fazed, humorous, energetic, caring and hard-working, they enrich the lives of their students and care for them in a myriad of ways above and beyond the call of duty.

A special class within mainstream proved to be the ideal setting for our new pupils and they blossomed academically and socially. Challenging behaviours abounded but were accepted and dealt with as part of the package.

Two new pupils enrolled as Junior Infants in September 2008. They have both settled in very well and are two great buddies.



Both are integrated for a large part of the day in mainstream Junior Infant classes.

My initial expectation was that integration would probably be in the areas of Art, PE and Music. Again, the children proved me wrong. Integration is taking place throughout all subject areas. One of the first pupils enrolled is now in fifth class and we are proudly embarking on preparing for the transition to mainstream secondary in a year's time!

Now lest anyone think that all is sweetness and light, there are many negatives. Our rooms will be too small for next year's extra two pupils. Every week there is at least one day of lugging everything out of the classroom for the ICA (Irish Country-Women's Association) meeting and lugging it back in the next morning. In winter, mice run riot. We have no services attached to the class i.e. no physiotherapy, speech therapy or occupational therapy. HSE will not have funding for any services for us for the foreseeable future and that was what I was told before the recession. Any services the pupils get are as a result of their involvement in Community Care and not our unit. This is the first year that our NEPS psychologist has been given time to allocate to the unit. I now realise that the team will be put to the pin of their collar to work with six pupils and continue the integration and the five different programmes of work. No doddle whatsoever.

But I can honestly say, however, that the negatives are minor compared with the highs such as the first child from the class

making First Communion (when all of us present shed a few tears) watching the children take part in the Junior Infant Christmas play, seeing the children do their home-work! These are the day to day things that keep the team going.

Much of this article has been about what St. Canice's has done for the Special Class. Equally as relevant is what the class has done for St. Canice's. I don't think I can answer that without using clichés. From the very start, the reaction of the pupils has been amazing. The children in mainstream classes where integration takes place have shown a depth of sensitivity and innate

“ The children in mainstream classes where integration takes place have shown a depth of sensitivity and innate kindness that we would never have expected. ”

kindness that we would never have expected. We have all had our minds broadened. We see a different side to life and education. Many of our special needs pupils in mainstream also use the facilities of the unit. Our special class teacher has shared her expertise generously and mainstream and resource teachers have used behaviour strategies from the unit very successfully with other children. We have a greater appreciation of what a struggle it is for many children to cope with school and in turn a greater appreciation of those who progress well.

Great tribute must be paid to our whole staff who welcome the pupils from the special class into their mainstream classes and tailor their teaching to their needs. Staff members have also gone out of their way to include pupils in extra-curricular activities where possible. We are all far more knowledgeable and aware of the whole area of autism. I can now ask relevant questions when parents come to talk about enrolling children in the class and even understand some of the answers since I've added the likes of ABA, Teacch, PECs, and the Department favourite – “eclectic” to my vocabulary! Our staff and board are certainly in agreement that this has been a hugely positive venture for the school. Sometimes I think about how close we were to missing this experience simply from fear of the unknown and I think it is a lesson well learned.

For the future, we will have a busy year with a full class next year and we will have to sort out accommodation. We need to start work on supported peer social networks and look at the option of growing to a second class if necessary. As ever, the fight for resources will continue but like all schools, at the end of the day, we do our best for the pupils. To conclude, we would like to pay special tribute to the work of our parents who fought long and hard to secure a suitable school placement for their children. Our class would never have come about but for their tenacity and determination to provide for their children. They can take pride in the fact that the class they fought for is now there not only for their children but hopefully for many others for years to come. ■

NCSE NEWS – The Newsletter

It is planned to publish NCSE NEWS twice a year initially. The intention is that this newsletter will provide information and news items on the work and operations of the NCSE as well as a range of articles on how we, together with schools and other agencies,

make a practical difference in the lives of children with special educational needs. We also intend to use this newsletter to bring research which the Council is undertaking to your notice and to publish information articles on the findings.

We will be happy to consider articles from schools, individual teachers and parents and other professionals about their experience in supporting children with special educational needs for publication.

Articles to be considered for publication and comments about the newsletter may be emailed to: newsletter@ncse.ie ■

Scoil Mhuire gan Smál, Kilsaran

GERRY McCABE, PRINCIPAL

Scoil Mhuire gan Smál, Kilsaran, Co. Louth is a mainstream primary school. We are delighted to have established a number of special classes within our school. In April 2004 we were first approached by the Department of Education and Science (DES) to set up a class for children with Severe and Profound Learning Disabilities. Following much planning and support from the DES in conjunction with the Health Service Executive, this class opened in September 2004.

Today, following collaboration with the NCSE, we have two additional special classes which cater for pupils with Autism and in the near future we hope to open an Early Intervention class for pupils with Autism.

After the initial difficulties, including the fear factor that had to be overcome, we have found it a greatly enriching experience to have our very special children as pupils in our school. Great co-operation between parents, staff, HSE teams, NCSE and DES has ensured that the special classes are very successful.

The establishment of the network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) has been invaluable in that there is now a more coordinated approach to providing for the special educational needs of our pupils. The SENO makes the link between parents, school and clinicians which helps to make special education more inclusive.

The children, while needing the support of special class placement, are included in all aspects of school life. The children in the mainstream regard the special children as part of the school 'family' and playtime particularly has become a very enjoyable and caring environment for everyone.

The local HSE Teams (Early Intervention, Children's Team and



“ In order for the class to be effective, it was necessary to provide a stress free and calm environment. Unfortunately this does not mean silent ”

Autism Team) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) have a very close working relationship with school staff. They are often in the school supporting the pupil's education through direct pupil support, staff support and through guidance on the Individual Educational Plan process. The Special Education Support Service also provides training to staff. There is mutual and constant communication and collaboration with parents.

In order to provide a quality education and address the pupil's care needs, the teachers meet with the staff team (SNAs) before

class begins. Responsibilities and roles are clear. Communication, teaching strategies and behaviour interventions are reviewed constantly.

One of the special class teachers makes the point that: 'In order for the class to be effective, it is necessary to provide a stress free and calm environment. Unfortunately this does not mean silent. The adults need to be stress free and to keep calm at all times, and not react to any adverse changes in behaviour. This can only be brought about with a concerted team effort by a creative, passionate and committed team.'

There is a constant focus by all the teachers in supporting the pupils to become more included in the mainstream classes. To date this has been successfully achieved whereby three pupils originally enrolled in the Autism classes are now fully included in mainstream classes.

The principal, Mr Gerry McCabe, acknowledges that while it has increased the overall workload, the benefits for the school and the community have been phenomenal. The children in the special classes are very much part of the life of the school; they are greeted by name by the other children and they and their families are known and recognised in the local community.

The Board of Management, under the chairmanship of Fr. Eamon Treanor, has been fully supportive and encouraging of the integration of the special classes into the school. This is seen to be very much part of the Catholic Ethos under which we operate as an Inclusive School.