



Special Classes in Mainstream Primary & Post Primary Schools

Report On the Analysis of Down Syndrome Ireland Members Survey



Introduction

We are very aware of the imbalance in the availability of special classes for children with Down syndrome at both Primary and Post Primary level, and have compiled an overview in October of class availability nationally based on numbers obtained from the NCSE on September 11th 2024. We have already lobbied the Minister, the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on a number of occasions and we will continue to do so. Our Election Manifesto also reflected this lobbying issue.

A new Circular in relation to Special Class provision going forward has been published and can be accessed here for your information: <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/f16ca-new-measures-to-support-the-forward-planning-for-special-education-provision/>

Before meeting again with the Minister and Department officials, we needed statistics to ascertain the actual level of interest and demand there is nationally in the establishment of special classes in Primary and Post Primary schools for our members. A survey was issued to 1735 members on November 17th 2024, and the findings of that survey are outlined in the Report.

Overview of Class Types Available as per NCSE on September 11th 2024

- Autism / Autistic Spectrum
- ASD Early Intervention
- Mild General Learning Disability
- Moderate General Learning Disability
- Severe / Profound General Learning Disability
- Specific Speech & Language
- Hearing Impairment
- Early Intervention Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Multiple Disabilities
- Specific Learning Disability
- Emotional & Behavioural
- Emotional Disturbance
- Other

Special Classes by Type Available Nationally as on September 11th 2024 (NCSE)

Primary School

Class Type	Number of Classes
Autism / Autistic Spectrum	1987
ASD Early Intervention	154
Mild General Learning Disability	38
Moderate General Learning Disability	27
Severe / Profound General Learning Disability	8
Specific Speech & Language	65
Hearing Impairment	16
Early Intervention Hearing Impairment	1
Visual Impairment	0
Multiple Disabilities	21
Specific Learning Disability	13
Emotional & Behavioural	2
Emotional Disturbance	4
Other	0
Total Number of Special Classes - Primary	2336

Post Primary School

Class Type	Number of Classes
Autism / Autistic Spectrum	900
ASD Early Intervention	0
Mild General Learning Disability	16
Moderate General Learning Disability	51
Severe / Profound General Learning Disability	1
Specific Speech & Language	0
Hearing Impairment	8
Early Intervention Hearing Impairment	0
Visual Impairment	2
Multiple Disabilities	13
Specific Learning Disability	0
Emotional & Behavioural	0
Emotional Disturbance	2

Other	1
Total Number of Special Classes – Post Primary	994

Members Survey November 2024

Total Number of Responses Received:

276

This represents 15.9% of the total members invited to participate

Responses by County Breakdown:

County	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses
Carlow	6	2.21%
Cavan	2	0.74%
Clare	8	2.94%
Cork	27	9.93%
Donegal	8	2.94%
Dublin	67	24.63%
Galway	26	9.56%
Kerry	8	2.94%
Kildare	24	8.82%
Kilkenny	5	1.84%
Laois	1	0.37%
Leitrim	1	0.37%
Limerick	10	3.68%
Longford	1	0.37%
Louth	5	1.84%
Mayo	9	3.31%
Meath	15	5.51%
Monaghan	6	2.21%
Offaly	3	1.10%
Roscommon	2	0.74%
Sligo	4	1.47%
Tipperary	4	1.47%
Waterford	9	3.31%
Westmeath	7	2.57%
Wexford	7	2.57%
Wicklow	7	2.57%

Total	272	
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Section One Current Provision

Current Educational Settings:

Current Setting	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses
Pre-School	24	8.70%
Mainstream Primary School	131	47.46%
Special Class in a Mainstream Primary School	23	8.33%
Special School - Primary Stage	30	10.87%
Mainstream Post-Primary School	14	5.07%
Special Class in a Mainstream Post-Primary School	19	6.88%
Special School - Post-Primary Stage	32	11.59%
None of These	3	1.09%
Total:	276	

Responses to 'None of These'

- We are only attending 2 hours in special school after being home schooled last year
- My child is being Home Schooled
- My child is not attending any Education Setting at this time

Hours Spent in Special Class Settings:

(a) Hours Spent Daily in Special Class in Mainstream Primary School

Hours	Number of Children
1 Hour	0
2 Hours	0
3 Hours	1
4 Hours	4
5 Hours	16

Don't Know	2
Total:	23

(b) Hours Spent Daily in Special Class in Mainstream Post Primary School

Hours	Number of Students
1 Hour	2
2 Hours	1
3 Hours	1
4 Hours	4
5 Hours	4
6 Hours	3
7 Hours	3
Don't Know	1
Total	19

These findings are concerning for two reasons:

1. Students in special classes, at both Primary and Post Primary stage, should be given opportunities to be included in mainstream classes for some activities or subjects. However, looking at the figures in the Tables above, not all children are having this opportunity. Taking the Primary day as being approximately 5 hours, 16 children from the 23 responses are having no opportunity to join their peers in the mainstream class. Similarly, taking the Post Primary day as being approximately 7 hours, 3 children from the 19 responses are also being denied any opportunity.
2. The fact that 'don't know' has also featured in the responses is also worrying. Parents should be informed by the school in relation to the timetabling for their child's time at school. If the school do not automatically provide this information, parents should request it.

Section Two Future Provision

**A Special Class Option should be available as a choice for all children with Down syndrome at the Primary School stage
(Total Responses: 249)**

	Number of Responses	Total % Responses
Yes	239	95.98%
No	10	4.02%
Total	249	

**Category of Special Class of benefit to children with Down syndrome at the Primary School stage
Total Responses: (244)
(Multiple Options could be selected)**

Class Type	Number of Responses per Option
Mild General Learning Disability Class	170
Moderate General Learning Disability Class	155
Severe / Profound General Learning Disability Class	30
Specific Speech & Language Disorder Class	78
Multiple Disabilities Class	83
Other	12

Responses to 'Other' Class Type Option included:

- It depends on the children who wish to enrol and should be child centred
- According to child need
- OT Services in regard to self-care, play therapy should be considered
- We'd be open to other possibilities

- It should depend on the child 's individual learning needs and also doesn't come down to amount of hours
- Special class specific to Down syndrome
- Dependent on each child's level of ID
- My child is currently in mainstream primary and attends SET- I feel that this model currently suits him well. However I believe that all children with DS would benefit from having the choice to also enrol in a special class- particularly speech disorder, and a class supportive of learning disability- it would be important to have fluid admission criteria to ensure that all students needs are being met
- I have reservations about special classes in primary. It serves to make the child with DS 'other'. Integration into mainstream will be less effective
- Categorisation of disability for school setting isn't a practical approach, while categorisation in relation to intellectual disability may be practical in education settings but Down syndrome isn't just an intellectual disability so many more challenges/issues arise for people with Down syndrome. Education policy should accommodate the nuanced and complex nature of disability instead of trying to fit children into rigid policies

**A Special Class Option should be available as a choice for all children with Down syndrome at the Post Primary School stage
(Total Responses: 249)**

	Number of Responses	Total % Responses
Yes	246	98.8%
No	3	1.2%
Total	249	

**Category of Special Class of benefit to children with Down syndrome at the Post Primary School stage
Total Responses: (248)
(Multiple Options could be selected)**

Class Type	Number of Responses per Option
Mild General Learning Disability Class	181
Moderate General Learning Disability Class	163
Severe / Profound General Learning Disability Class	31
Specific Speech & Language Disorder Class	74
Multiple Disabilities Class	90

Other	14
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Responses to 'Other' Class Type Option included:

- Again, a few options may be necessary to meet individual learning needs.
- According to child need - currently our daughter is in special class in secondary school as the current focus of the department is very on autism. The special class understanding is very linked to autism. Over all, away from this the experience for our daughter and the level of communication and interest in our daughter and her needs from the teacher perspective has been exceptional
- As per the primary school update, recommending OT services especially on self-care and peer to interactions
- We are open to other possibilities.
- I would advocate for inclusion. I advocate for less segregation. Teacher training and school ethos needs to support inclusion. My child is disabled only when they do not get support WITH and alongside peers, not separate.
- I feel that it would be important for SENO to be aware of the profile of children with special needs in a catchment area- so that schools can respond to that need, and supply suitable classes for the children in catchment- rather than children not having choice in their local schools- which is current scenario for kids with DS
- Depends on the child
- Access to a particular class should be based on the individual child's learning needs and child and family preference. It's doesn't come from DOB or to hours - it comes down to equity
- Categorisation of disability for educational purposes is pointless in communities where multiple options are available. The current approach of bussing children out of communities to go to school rather than introducing flexible admissions policy. Providing support and resources in existing schools in communities is more effective and with an equality based approach. Having different categorisation of intellectual disability may work where students can access the relevant category in their own community
- Special class specific to Down syndrome.

Hours Spent in Special Class Settings:

In response to the question, **ideally**, how many hours per day do you feel a child should be in the Special Class at the Primary School stage?
(Total responses: 240)

Hours	Number of Responses
1 Hour	14
2 Hours	55
3 Hours	42
4 Hours	24

5 Hours	45
Don't Know	60

In response to the question, **ideally**, how many hours per day do you feel a child should be in the Special Class at the Post Primary School stage?
(Total responses: 245)

Hours	Number of Responses
1 Hour	5
2 Hours	24
3 Hours	42
4 Hours	42
5 Hours	22
6 Hours	24
7 Hours	25
Don't Know	61

These findings are again concerning for the same reason as outlined above.

Students in special classes, at both Primary and Post Primary stage, should be given opportunities to be included in mainstream classes for some activities or subjects. However, looking at the figures in the Tables above, parents do not feel that this opportunity is important. Again, taking the Primary day as being approximately 5 hours, 45 respondents indicated that, ideally, they felt that the child should spend the full day in the Special Class. Similarly, taking the Post Primary day as being approximately 7 hours, 25 respondents indicated that, ideally, the child should spend the full day in the Special Class.

Section Three Comparison of Findings

Viewing Future Special Class Provision as outlined above against the Current Provision in each County (as per NCSE Figures September 11th 2024)

Note:

- Some suggestions from this research included Down syndrome specific classes. There are currently no Down syndrome specific classes.
- In addition, some children with a dual diagnosis of Down syndrome and Autism are enrolled in Autism classes. As we are very aware of the large numbers of Autism classes nationally, these figures were not requested in the survey, which has tried to

establish the demand for the special class settings as listed in the County tables below.

Carlow

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	4	0	5	0
Moderate GLD Class	4	1	5	1
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	2	0	1	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	2	0	1	0

Cavan

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	1	2	0	0
Moderate GLD Class	1	1	1	2
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	2	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	0	0	0	0

Clare

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	5	0	6	2
Moderate GLD Class	3	0	3	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	0	2	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	6	2	3	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	4	2	4	0

Cork

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	16	1	17	2
Moderate GLD Class	17	8	18	8
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	1	2	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	7	8	6	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	11	6	14	6

Donegal

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	4	0	5	0
Moderate GLD Class	3	1	4	3
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	2	1	1
Specific S & L Disorder Class	2	4	3	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	3	3	3	4

Dublin

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	45	11	52	0
Moderate GLD Class	41	2	44	6
Severe / Profound GLD Class	9	0	9	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	17	11	19	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	18	0	18	0

Galway

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	16	2	17	0
Moderate GLD Class	17	4	16	9
Severe / Profound GLD Class	5	1	5	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	8	6	9	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	8	2	9	0

Kerry

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	6	2	6	0
Moderate GLD Class	4	1	5	1
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	3	2	4	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	3	4	4	1

Kildare

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	14	1	15	2
Moderate GLD Class	16	2	17	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	5	2	5	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	6	0	6	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	10	0	9	0

Kilkenny

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	2	0	2	0
Moderate GLD Class	4	1	4	3
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	2	2	1	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	2	0	1	0

Laois

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Moderate GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	1	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	0	1	0

Leitrim

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Moderate GLD Class	0	0	0	3
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	0	0	0

Multiple Disabilities Class	0	0	0	0
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Limerick

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	6	2	6	1
Moderate GLD Class	2	1	2	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	2	0	2	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	4	4	3	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	2	0	2	0

Longford

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	0	0	0	1
Moderate GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	1	0	1	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	0	0	0	0

Louth

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	2	0	1	0
Moderate GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	1	1	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	2	0	0

Multiple Disabilities Class	1	1	1	0
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Mayo

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	6	0	5	0
Moderate GLD Class	5	1	4	3
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	2	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	4	0	5	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	5	3	6	0

Meath

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	9	1	9	0
Moderate GLD Class	9	1	10	1
Severe / Profound GLD Class	2	1	1	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	2	3	2	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	2	0	2	0

Monaghan

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	6	3	6	2
Moderate GLD Class	5	1	5	1

Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	1	2	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	2	0	2	0

Offaly

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	1	4	2	3
Moderate GLD Class	2	2	2	4
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	1	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	0	0	1	0

Roscommon

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	1	0	1	0
Moderate GLD Class	0	0	0	2
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	1	0	1	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	0	1	2

Sligo

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	3	1	4	0
Moderate GLD Class	3	0	3	3
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	1	2	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	0	0	1	0

Tipperary

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	2	1	2	1
Moderate GLD Class	2	0	2	1
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	0	3	0	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	0	1	0

Waterford

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	9	0	7	0
Moderate GLD Class	5	0	6	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	3	2	3	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	3	0	3	0

Westmeath

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	3	2	2	0
Moderate GLD Class	2	0	2	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	3	1	2	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	0	2	0

Wexford

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	3	2	3	0
Moderate GLD Class	3	0	4	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	1	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	2	1	2	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	1	1	0

Wicklow

Class Type	Primary Stage		Post Primary Stage	
	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision	Future Provision by Number of Respondents	Current Provision
Mild GLD Class	2	3	4	2
Moderate GLD Class	4	0	3	0
Severe / Profound GLD Class	0	0	0	0
Specific S & L Disorder Class	1	1	1	0
Multiple Disabilities Class	1	0	1	0

It is clear from the information provided by members that there is a real need for the establishment of special classes nationally, with the results from the survey highlighting how few counties there are where the provision of special classes meets or exceeds the identified needs of children and students with Down syndrome.

Section Four Additional Survey Comments from Members

Observations on availability of Special Classes in Cork

Given the size of Cork and Cork County (stretching all the way to Bantry/Allihies), I think it's worth highlighting that of the 2 special classes for mild learning disabilities (MLD)) in mainstream, there are a total of ZERO in the whole of Cork City. My daughter will go to a mainstream secondary school but unfortunately they don't have a special class for MLD, but then again, neither does any other school in Cork City.

Resources in Schools

The lack of resources in a mainstream secondary school is sole destroying. I believe these schools want to support and educate but do not have the man power or resources. My son is in a secondary school and I fought so hard. I really feel it's an area that needs so much support and it's disgraceful

Negativity in Setting Up Special Class

I recently set up a special class in mainstream primary school against a backdrop of incredible negativity from CDNT. The class is not properly resourced with SNAs. I am currently trying at national level to change the SNA allocation in the special class so the allocation reflects numbers of children in the class and does not require further reports to say how "bad" our children are.

Issue with Autism Classes not included in the Survey

I was delighted to see your survey. I feel that DSI have been too slow to get involved in this discussion. I fear they are almost too late as another circular has already been issued intentionally excluding our children. I understand that the position taken has been to fight for mainstream, but in my opinion our children and their families deserve options. Given that so much department of education resources will now be put into special classes, we should have been ensuring our children have access to those resources.

I was disappointed that the survey had no space for comments. Also the questions did not fully address the main issue when it comes to special classes. An ASD diagnosis. My daughter is in a special class, purely because she has an additional diagnosis of ASD and this would be true for the vast majority of kids with DS in special classes. I was disappointed that the survey did not gather this information.

I cannot see the relevance of time spent in the special class. I presume it refers to integration and inclusion. But this will differ for each child and differ each year.

Please do more to listen to the needs of families in this rapidly changing landscape of education.

Issue relating to SENO Response to Parent Wishing to Enrol a Child in a Special Class

Without the necessary paperwork, I will only issue a letter advising that in the absence of a diagnosis and recommendation, a child does not meet criteria for placement in a special class. This mother needs to engage with the CDNT Team to see what the plan is for her child as school starters are usually classed as priority for the CDNT team.

Conclusion

The lack of availability nationally of special classes for children with Down syndrome at both Primary and Post Primary level has been highlighted in this survey, and we are very grateful to our members who completed our survey and provided us with this valuable information. This report will be vitally important as we continue to advocate for our members with the Minsters for Education & Special Education as soon as they have been appointed. In addition, we will continue or engagement with officials from the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education, and will also request a hearing with the relevant Oireachtas Education Committee when established.