

Down Syndrome Ireland

Submission to the National Conversation on the Future of Education

Analysis Report Down Syndrome Ireland Members Survey



March 2026

Introduction

Convention on Education and National Conversation

The National Conversation on Education was launched by Minister for Education and Youth, Hildegard Naughton, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley and Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion, Michael Moynihan on January 14th 2026.

The outcomes of the National Conversation on Education will be used to inform the agenda for the Convention on Education which will take place later this year. The Convention on Education is a once in a generation opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators and wider society to help shape Ireland's education system for decades to come, and will inform a new long-term strategy for the future of education in Ireland. The focus will be on primary and post-primary schools, the transitions within education, looking at what is working well, what challenges need attention, and what changes may be needed in the years ahead.

A submission has been made to the National Conversation on Education on behalf of Down Syndrome Ireland (DSI). Members were asked to participate in a survey to ascertain what they felt were the important issues in education currently; and to outline what changes they would recommend for the future of our education system with specific reference to children with Down syndrome across all stages of their educational journey. The analysis of the findings from the survey provided the information needed to ensure that our submission presents the issues highlighted by members, and informs the long term strategy for the future of education in Ireland.

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Background Information on Survey

Survey Title

DSI Member Submission for the Department of Education & Youth Conversation on Education

A survey was issued to **1462 members** on January 19th, 2026, and the analysis of the findings from the survey are outlined in this Report. The total response rate was **159** which represented **11% (10.87)** of the total respondents invited to participate. **24 of the 26 counties** were represented in the survey. The response rate varied from question to question, with respondents choosing not to answer some questions.

A transcript of the submission from DSI to the National Conversation on Education is also included in this report.

*Report prepared by Dr Fidelma Brady, Head of Education, Down Syndrome Ireland
March 2026*



Section One

Quantitative Data - Questions 1, 2 & 3

Question 1: Geographical Location of Respondents

County	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses
Carlow	2	1.28
Cavan	0	0
Clare	5	3.21
Cork	17	10.90
Donegal	3	1.92
Dublin	33	21.15
OGalway	6	3.85
Kerry	4	2.56
Kildare	15	9.62
Kilkenny	3	1.92
Laois	1	0.64
Leitrim	2	1.28
Limerick	6	3.85
Longford	0	0
Louth	1	0.64
Mayo	7	4.49
Meath	12	7.69
Monaghan	2	1.28
Offaly	4	2.56
Roscommon	1	0.64
Sligo	9	5.77
Tipperary	3	1.92
Waterford	7	4.49
Westmeath	5	3.21
Wexford	6	3.85
Wicklow	2	1.28
Total	159	

Question 2: Class Setting Attended by Children of the Respondents

Class Setting	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses
Mainstream Pre-School	23	14.65
Special Education Pre-School	5	3.18
Mainstream Class Primary School - Infants to Second Class	23	14.65
Mainstream Class - Primary School - Third to Sixth Class	31	19.75
Special Class - Mainstream Primary School	6	3.82
Mainstream Class -Post Primary School- Junior Cycle	4	2.55
Mainstream Post Primary - Transition Year	0	0
Mainstream Post Primary - Senior Cycle	9	5.73
Special Class - Mainstream Post Primary	22	14.07
Special School - Primary Stage	14	8.92
Special School- Post Primary Stage	19	12.10
Home Schooled	1	0.64
<i>Total</i>	157	

Question 3: Age of Children of the Respondents

Age of Children (Years)	Number of Responses	% of Total Responses
2	3	1.90
3	9	5.70
4	8	5.06
5	9	5.70
6	13	8.23
7	15	9.49
8	2	1.27
9	5	3.16
10	13	8.23
11	12	7.59
12	6	3.80
13	14	8.86
14	9	5.70
15	9	5.70
16	11	6.96
17	9	5.70
18	11	6.96
19	0	0
20	0	0
Total	158	

Section Two

Question 4: What do you think is working well for your child in Education today?

In their responses, members generally expressed a positive outlook on what is working well for their children in education, with many highlighting inclusive education models, strong SNA support, and individualized instruction as key strengths. Some also noted benefits from small class sizes, quality teaching staff, and opportunities for peer integration. A few responses emphasized the importance of a supportive school environment and curriculum flexibility. While most feedback was favourable, a minority of members raised concerns about staff training, assessment practices, and limited post-primary options. Overall, tailored support and inclusive practices were valued, although some challenges have been identified in consistency and resources.

A thematic analysis of member's responses to Question 4 highlighted the following areas or themes that they felt were working well for their child in Education today. The themes are listed here in descending order of priority as suggested by respondents. A sample of respondent's comments are included to illustrate each theme. There may be duplication of responses across a number of themes.

- **Inclusive Education Models**
 - *Inclusion in mainstream has created an environment to achieve more in school. He is currently studying junior cert.*
 - *The sense of him belonging, valued and supported in his setting.*
- **SNA Support and Access**
 - *SNA support - essential for children in mainstream with mild diagnosis to continue to access the curriculum.*
 - *Her SNA is vital to her learning and staying on task.*
- **Individualised and Differentiated Instruction**
 - *Our child is fully supported by wonderful teachers and SNAs who are adept at recognising her academic, social and emotional needs. She is stimulated daily and challenged in her learning journey.*
 - *Inclusion with mainstream class with access to SNA. He is taken out for differentiated maths. Extra support in subjects during Irish exemption classes.*
- **Peer Relationships and Integration**
 - *My daughter enjoys going to school. Meeting the teachers, SNAs and class mates.*

- *Whole school approach to inclusion, positive learning environments, peer learning and big heart values in the school.*
- **Specialized Support Services**
 - *We are very lucky with our preschool as they have the extra manpower to give our child one on one and take him out of the room as much as he wants. They have a sensory room too so we are very fortunate.*
 - *Her extra support is really helping her academically.*
- **Teacher and Staff Quality**
 - *The principal of our school was formerly an SET, as was the deputy principal. There is an interest in supporting children with additional needs in our school.*
 - *Teacher is very caring and knowledgeable and engaged in her development.*
- **Small Class Size**
 - *Access to education in local community in an appropriate class size that can cater for individual educational needs and meaningfully work towards L2LPs.*
 - *Small classes, IEP, different activities (drama, music, swimming...)*
- **Curriculum Flexibility and Adaptation**
 - *Integrated into mainstream. Work is differentiated for him.*
 - *Access to equivalent programme of subjects adapted to ability of children in special class, ability to mix with mainstream as appropriate, peers within special class for genuine friendship group.*
- **Life and Daily Living Skills**
 - *Smaller class, teachers are more equipped to individual teaching in accordance with student abilities. They learn life skills essential for living in the real world.*
 - *Integration into mainstream but with a huge emphasis on social and community skills and life skills.*
- **School Environment and Ethos**
 - *The blended programme approach, the ethos of the school community.*
 - *Being in the local school that her siblings attended where she is known.*
- **Social and Communication Skills**
 - *Being with her peers. It has brought on her speech and social skills along with good behaviour.*
 - *Mainstream crèche learning. My daughter is seeing and learning from kids in a structured setting. She has learned to sit and eat and play and learn.*

- **Routine and Structure**
 - *Routines, familiarity, predictability.*
 - *The structure of the day suits him.*
- **Staffing Levels and Ratios**
 - *Small classes (5/6) with ratio - One teacher and two SNAs.*
 - *There is good availability of an SNA and he does get some one on one time every day with an SET.*
- **Disability-Specific Instruction**
 - *My child is in early intervention playschool because of an ASD diagnosis that we had to seek privately. Early intervention playschools do not accept children with DS as a primary diagnosis. It's only available to children with ASD. The fact the numbers are small, 5kids to 3 teachers, they teach through lámh and are skill acquisition focussed is brilliant. It should extend to all children with the need for this intervention, not just those with ASD.*
 - *An educational approached tailored to the specific needs of a child with an intellectual disability rather than a "one size fits all" approach.*
- **Arts and Enrichment Activities**
 - *Brilliant school and teachers. Every week going to a mainstream secondary school to play basketball. Lots of local link bus trips into town. Swimming lessons and loads of art projects.*
 - *Variety and movemen.t*
- **Early Intervention Programs**
 - *My child attends an early intervention centre run by the HSE and they are excellent.*
 - *A well run community childcare facility with highly trained staff.*
- **Dual and Hybrid Placement Models**
 - *Mix of special class and mainstream.*
 - *Her school provide an excellent hybrid model, where she attends mainstream classes, and receives regular resource hours to meet extra support required in core subjects as needed. Therefore receiving the benefit of an education that is both inclusive and fully supporting her additional needs.*
- **Digital Technology Integration**
 - *Inclusion, use of iPad and community integration.*
 - *Digital technology in school.*
- **School Transportation**
 - *Bus transportation to and from school.*

Question 5: What do you think could be improved for your child in Education today?

Members shared a range of views with a central focus on inclusion and support for students with Down syndrome. Many highlighted the need for improved mainstream school inclusion, better teacher training for inclusive practices, and increased access to special needs assistants and therapy services. Some also called for more special class availability, equitable resources, and Down syndrome-specific educational approaches. A few members noted challenges with curriculum differentiation and peer socialization. While some positive experiences were mentioned, most responses emphasized gaps in support and resources.

A thematic analysis of member's responses to Question 5 highlighted the following areas or themes that they felt were working well for their child in Education today. The themes are listed here in descending order of priority as suggested by respondents. A sample of respondent's comments are included to illustrate each theme. There may be duplication of responses across a number of themes.

- **Mainstream School Inclusion**

- *More integration into the mainstream.*
- *Provision of moderate-range "special classes" in mainstream in the area. Upskilling and resourcing mainstream schools to be inclusive of children with disabilities.*

- **Special Class Availability & Placement**

- *His needs cannot be met in the mainstream classroom. No unit for children with mild general learning disabilities.*
- *We've been left very disappointed at the lack of special classes in our local area. We had a brand new school built with the promise of 3 special classes and they have all been for autism only.*

- **Teacher Training for Inclusion**

- *Motivation of Teachers and additional provision of training for Teachers. Inclusion in very important...*
- *Specialised teaching around inclusive practices, scaffolding, and creative differentiation.*

- **Therapy Services in Schools**

- *SLT and OT integrated into the school to help support hand writing, reading, tips and tricks to support learning and support teachers as well as young people's*
- *Support for the school. The teachers go on training courses to try and learn how to best support our child. Little to no access to SLT or OT for*

guidance or input. The CDNT service is a joke. We have had nothing concrete in terms of support since he started school (with the exception of getting a special chair for the classroom).

- **Special Needs Assistant Staffing**

- *Not having to beg for SNA support. All we want is the best for our kids and they shouldn't have to fight for everything.*
- *Each child deserves 1:1 aim support. Currently it is for the room. This is wholly wrong - main steam facilities are just using this as a numbers game to have to hire less permanent staff. Each child who is assessed as needing, should have access to 1:1 aims teacher in preschool and SNA/ SET teacher in formal school environment.*

- **Speech & Language Therapy Services**

- *More SLT and staff training is needed.*
- *Speech therapy in school, more work on communication as he is non-verbal.*

- **Individualised Education Plans**

- *Improved implementation of individual needs assessment to ensure ongoing educational progress.*
- *Some professionals implementing closer attention to child's needs.*

- **Special Education Support Hours**

- *My daughter receives 30mins a day extra support. Under the old system she would have closer to an hour a day which would help her to achieve academic goals in line with her peers.*
- *More time with SET teacher on a one to one basis.*

- **Literacy & Numeracy Instruction**

- *Foundation maths could be brought back common is great but too much of a jump for our kids.*
- *Bigger focus of more individualised curriculum for each child to drive their literacy and numeracy potentials.*

- **Equitable Resource Allocation**

- *The same opportunity as every child and the right support for his development.*
- *The same things that have needed to be improved for generations. More special schools, more resources for special schools. Stop pushing children to mainstream. Stop making special schools a "lesser" option.*

- **Curriculum Differentiation**
 - *More differentiation so she can stay in mainstream class. Had to drop some subjects in 6th year as she was just colouring.*
 - *More access to an individualised curriculum.*
- **Staff Continuity & Retention**
 - *Retention of staff to provide continuity.*
 - *Make things simpler to move on into the next stage*
- **Home-School Communication**
 - *Better communication teacher/parents*
 - *Better communication between teachers and parent and clear working plan.*
- **Peer Socialisation Opportunities**
 - *More integration whereby special school students and mainstream students in their locality get to mix from time to time.*
 - *School facilities. After school curriculum classes, friendships with more mainstream students.*
- **Down Syndrome Specific Education**
 - *Focus on adapting the curriculum to accommodate the need of young people with Down syndrome not just Autism. The focus of the department is on ASD classes and this creates an inequality of access for young people with Down syndrome. This has aligned teaching methodologies in schools to autism to the detriment of children with Down syndrome who could achieve if given the opportunity.*
 - *More education around children with Down syndrome for teachers to come up with adjusted work for them.*
- **Educational Resources and Materials**
 - *Educators need to raise their expectations. More notes need to be provided so that we can do a little revision and support at home. Additional focus on physical education.*
 - *Access to more sensory and development aiding toys and equipment to encourage speech and thought processes but also safe for him.*
- **Life Skills Instruction**
 - *A reduction in focus on academics and an increase in focus on socialisation and practical life skills.*

- *More focus on life skills and understanding that people with Down syndrome need reinforcement to learn.*
- **Early Intervention Services**
 - *Early intervention services*
 - *More input from CDNT into preschool. For example, more visits by psychology and SLT.*

Question 6: What needs do you think are becoming more important for your child in Education today?

Members highlighted a growing importance on life and social skills development, with many emphasizing the need for meaningful inclusion in mainstream education. Support for teacher collaboration, access to special needs assistants, improved social inclusion and peer interaction were also frequently mentioned. Some members stressed the need for more special class availability, tailored curriculum design, and enhanced literacy and writing support. A notable minority expressed frustration with limited resources, insufficient special education placements, and gaps in support for transitions and future planning. Overall, feedback reflects a desire for more inclusive, individualized, and well-supported educational experiences.

A thematic analysis of member's responses to Question 6 highlighted the following areas or themes that they felt were working well for their child in Education today. The themes are listed here in descending order of priority as suggested by respondents. A sample of respondent's comments are included to illustrate each theme. There may be duplication of responses across a number of themes.

- **Life and Social Skills Development**
 - *Definitely social skills and independent living skills, which aren't always prioritised at her stage of school, as she moves towards Post Primary level.*
 - *Technology, music, education in Maths and English to their ability, teach them to read, to speak in public without fear by encouraging them even if you have to hold their hand the first few times.*
- **Individualised Curriculum Design**
 - *Life skills definitely. Note should not be done at the cost of fundamental academic work.*
 - *Inclusion and the system changing to meet he needs. Not her having to adjust to fit a system.*

- **Educational Support Provision**
 - *IT skills, focused academic support because she is capable of far more than they think. PE should be expanding but isn't.*
 - *Support to achieve her fullest potential. Support from all services required to achieve this. Parents are being asked by CDNT what their child needs.*

- **Mainstream Education Inclusion**
 - *We need an education system that does not forget about the needs of our children within our Down syndrome community, one that not only focuses on autism diagnosis but one that includes and looks after other additional needs.*
 - *Real inclusion in secondary mainstream school.*

- **Transition and Future Planning**
 - *The need to be able to do TY in school no programme to include children with special needs also access to further education once secondary is over.*
 - *Preparation for support independence, early transition planning for adulthood such as work experience and life experiences not just at senior cycle.*

- **Special Class Availability**
 - *Children with Down syndrome are being left behind in all this "special class" conversation/crisis - we need a voice. We need more classes to accommodate our children. We're at the stage where we may have to move our family out of our community because we have no suitable school for our son with Down syndrome.*
 - *More places for children with mild learning disabilities, special classes are 99% geared towards children with autism.*

- **Speech and Language Therapy**
 - *Inclusivity speech and language should be provided for all.*
 - *Communication capabilities.*

- **Literacy & Writing Skills**
 - *Every day skills, reading and counting.*
 - *Reading and writing and computer use.*

- **Social Inclusion and Peer Interaction**
 - *Inclusion and preparation for the world of work and right to employment. A right to decide for themselves and not being pigeon-holed into services.*
 - *Social inclusion and creating friendships. Skills to communicate via texting and verbal. Everyday life skills.*

- **Therapeutic Services Access**
 - *No occupational therapist, very long waiting list from early intervention service.*
 - *Therapeutic services are scant, intermittent and even non-existent. The lack of therapy prevents child from achieving his potential.*

- **Teacher and Staff Collaboration**
 - *More frequent links between therapists and teachers so teachers can be better supported with resources.*
 - *More support. At the moment she receives one hour of resource teacher support per day. The remaining hours are spent in the main class and I find as she goes on they are watching movies and taking more breaks to fill the gap, rather than having more educational support.*

- **Technology for Learning**
 - *The continued use of technology to aid in education and communication where needed.*
 - *I-pads to be given immediately to do homework and with communications apps.*

- **Special Needs Assistant Support**
 - *An SNA should be provided for full school day and whatever after school activities they choose to be part of so that they can be included.*
 - *The need for SNA and additional resources to continue mainstream education successfully.*

- **Information Systems and Co-ordination**
 - *Integrated database throughout all networks involving my child's education.*
 - *Use of ICT as part of his lifestyles learning experience.*

- **Physical and Practical Activities**
 - *Social media and screen awareness, personal safety, exercise*
 - *Social interaction and specific continued sporting participation.*

- **Digital and Personal Safety**
 - *Use of AI / internet.*
 - *More safety awareness.*

- **Mental Health and Emotional Support**
 - *Inclusive practices that recognise social emotional growth and the building of friendships.*
 - *Mental health (anxiety), sensory, social skills, more flexibility in position primary special schools/classes to take level 1 or 2, social skills, adaptive literacy programmes.*
- **Sensory Needs Accommodation**
 - *Mainstream School will not suit the complex needs of my child. The school does not have enough places to send them for special ed. sessions.*
- **Early Intervention Waiting Times**
 - *No occupational therapist, very long waiting list from early intervention service.*

Question 7: What, if anything, is already changing in Education to meet your child's needs?

Member's responses reflect range of sentiment regarding recent changes in education for children with Down syndrome. Many parents note improvements such as increased access to special education classes, more individualized support, and greater use of educational technology. Some highlight enhanced teacher training and a more inclusive school culture. However, several express concern about limited resources, insufficient support for non-autistic children with Down syndrome, and slow progress in adapting policies. A few feel changes are minimal or unclear. Overall, while some positive steps are recognized, many members still identify gaps in meeting their children's needs.

A thematic analysis of member's responses to Question 7 highlighted the following areas or themes that they felt were working well for their child in Education today. The themes are listed here in descending order of priority as suggested by respondents. A sample of respondent's comments are included to illustrate each theme. There may be duplication of responses across a number of themes.

- **School Inclusion Practices**
 - *This school is not progressive in terms of new ways of teaching, inclusivity, integration, curriculum etc. However I know of some other schools that are more inclusive and work with all children individually to make sure they reach their potential.*
 - *A mind shift to social inclusion within education- no need to for DS to be in special schools - only if required.*

- **Special Education Class Access**

- *I can't believe there is talk to get rid of mild learning special schools. I am beyond shocked that not many people have seemed concerned about this in our community, never mind outside of our community where no one knows what I am talking about when I mention this. I am shocked that there is not a focus on opening up MGLD classes within mainstream if this plan of the government is going ahead with the government plans this year to have special schools as the most complex needs. I am shocked at the high number of autism classes within mainstream schools, yet no talk of introducing classes where someone with Down syndrome who doesn't suit a busy mainstream class can't access a suitable smaller class within a mainstream, that is unless we have a dual autism diagnosis. As I have been told by numerous psychologists autism is extremely hard to diagnosis in younger kids with Down syndrome so this seems unfair that we can't access smaller classes within our mainstream schools without an autism diagnosis. Yet for a child with a diagnosis of autism they can access their learning disability classes within mainstream, so would it not make more sense to have a class like that along with autism classes if needed within a mainstream school rather than just one option. There is no mention of suitable classes being added to mainstream. I don't understand how there is not more in the media or more conversations about all the change that is about to happen and the knock on effect it will have on our Down syndrome community.*
- *No changes. my child can get admission in Mainstream but with zero support, which is dangerous for my DS child and all mainstream schools saying "special classes are only for Autism child and no DS"*

- **Individualised Student Support**

- *Staff who are really caring of my child's needs, taking small steps but being sure child is reaching this step.*
- *She has one on one classes to help in certain areas. Once she completes a task she gets a short break before moving on to the next task.*

- **Curriculum Adaptation & Skills**

- *In theory the curriculum is differentiated for her, but it's still too classroom focused. We see this evidenced within the communication book with her SNA when she notes that our daughter works on writing skills but then needs extended time out.*
- *LCA availability in our school is a godsend. Credit where it is due.*

- **School Based Therapeutic Services**

- *I can only think of the government rolling out provision of providing therapists in school but it's not close to being provided for my son.*

- *Absolutely nothing. We have been promised more therapists in special schools but are still waiting.*
- **Student Engagement and Wellbeing**
 - *Primary School experience (e.g. communication and involvement with Student Support Plan) was very good. However, post primary school is a different experience.*
 - *Improved focus on safety and wellbeing.*
- **Special Needs Assistant Staffing**
 - *The recruitment of more SNAs within schools; yet this is still falling far short of the overall needs of our children with SEN, in particular in larger schools.*
 - *Rejigging the SNA is an absolute disaster, that extra work for schools and parents. As if a parent of a child with Down syndrome with fill out the needs as light hearted and not important. I would give an organ to keep her with an SNA, it was a joke to go through that.*
- **Autism Policy and Education**
 - *Nothing - except the spotlight being put on the need for more special classes, but there is a huge disconnect with the Government sanctioning classed only for children with ASD/Autism.*
 - *There is more focus on people with additional needs, primarily those with autism.*
- **Down Syndrome Teacher Development**
 - *Teachers doing courses to improve their knowledge on how to teach a child with Down syndrome.*
 - *It's dis-improving. NCSE are trying to get teachers to meet kid's needs but actually they need all the help to access the curriculum and reach their potential.*
- **Educational Technology Support**
 - *There is a very, very slow and reluctant adoption of new technologies.*
 - *The availability of technology to support her learning has made a huge difference to her outcomes and achievements.*
- **Assessment for Support Services**
 - *We suspect he has autism, and NEPS screened him as having severe autism however true to form, no full assessment with recommendations has occurred. That is his change.*
 - *I think it's harder now for our kids to sit state exams.*

- **Academic Achievement and Inclusion**
 - *The positive attitude towards DS for the most part. The belief in his ability and the expectation of academic success from my son.*
 - *Nothing, I don't see changes, it's still very academic.*
- **Down Syndrome Education Awareness**
 - *More is being highlighted about the needs of children with Down syndrome in educational settings.*
 - *Children with DS are being side lined. Autism, Autism, Autism -, my child's needs are not met because of the power of autism advocacy. Education is not treating children equally and this gets worse with every circular.*
- **Play and Physical Learning**
 - *More play focused.*
 - *More sports like gymnastics and kinetic learning.*
- **School – Parent Communication**
 - *More communication- the fact he's been taught in mainstream is great.*
 - *It has become more inclusive. Use of IEP's and regular contact with the school.*
- **Educational Funding Access**
 - *Education sector is trying hard to support and be inclusive but kids are falling off a cliff after they leave secondary school. Suddenly, no talks of inclusion anymore, thrown into service provision with very little say in it because of bundle funding and no access to individualised funding.*
- **Education Policy Direction**
 - *Current school is excellent at adapting the curriculum, however the focus on the department with regard to ASD has clouded schools and teaching staff with regard to approaches to young people with Down syndrome as one size does not fit all. Young people with Down syndrome are being actively disadvantaged by Department of Education and other department's policy which is affecting the long term narrative with regard to our population.*
 - *Not sure what's changing. All we hear about are the obstacles and problems in education*
- **Home –Base Education Responsibility**
 - *Nothing much really. I am still doing most of the education and comprehension at home.*

Question 8: What kind of Education system do you think we need in the years ahead?

Members shared a range of views on the future education system. Most emphasized the importance of flexible integration between mainstream and special classes, highlighting the need for both inclusive opportunities and specialized support. Many called for expanded special needs services, increased funding, and more special school places. Parental choice, teacher training in special education, and better access to therapies and sensory supports were also frequently mentioned. Some stressed the value of vocational pathways and curriculum adaptation to individual needs. A notable minority expressed concerns about one-size-fits-all approaches and advocated for targeted provisions for mild intellectual disabilities. Overall, feedback underscored a desire for a well-resourced, individualized system that balances inclusion with adaptations and accommodations for pupils with Down syndrome

A thematic analysis of member's responses to Question 8 highlighted the following areas or themes that they felt were working well for their child in Education today. The themes are listed here in descending order of priority as suggested by respondents. A sample of respondent's comments are included to illustrate each theme. There may be duplication of responses across a number of themes.

- **Inclusive Education Models**

- *One with no barriers. No special schools or classes. All children treated equally and fairly. One where everyone has a sense of belonging, supported and are valued.*
- *More progressive. Not to make assumptions. I'm very disappointed with the level 2 senior cycle programme, its lack of progress, ambition. The lack of progress to level 3 within secondary system outside of traditional exam format. The education system still remains exclusionary to those who don't fit the box. I would like a more ambitious, progressive approach with a focus to allow for people with different needs to be facilitated to contribute to the work place down the line.*

- **Individualised Education Approaches**

- *One that continues to promote inclusion and lends to the strengths of the individual child.*
- *An inclusive and child-centred one -- allowing for self-direction on the part of the children.*

- **Mainstream and Special Class Integration**

- *We need to be able to access suitable classes within our mainstream school. We need to have a strong voice as a community together. Special classes within our mainstream, by being called special, everyone assumes they include all additional needs. I think when the government announce new*

classes and it is only for an autism diagnosis this needs to be stated, not just listed as a special class. If the public aren't aware that the classes aren't for all additional needs then we don't have the support of the public to help fight for the need to open them either. Anyone I have spoken to in the general public seems to think 'we are so lucky' to have all of these special classes opening but understandably they are unaware these are generally for an autism diagnosis. We need an education system that supports a number of additional needs and a government that announce the reality of the classes being opened.

- *Mainstream with special classes is very good in theory.*

- **Special Needs Support Services**

- *We need much more multiclass support for our children with DS. There are autism classes but not enough multi classes and there needs to be a huge push here for urgent support so our children can succeed. Schools want to be inclusive but are limited in their resources. It's so unfair on the part of the department of education not to recognise this and not to act on it in advance of our children starting school. The support needs to be continuous throughout their school years. If the department really want our children to access mainstream education it is vital to support the school in providing sufficient resources and implementing better structures to scaffold our children. We shouldn't have to fight for the education of our child, it's exhausting and parents need smoother transitions to aid them in aiding their children through the process so they can navigate the system in a clear way.*
- *The schools need to be equipped for full days instead of the chaos that happens for families across the country. There should be therapists working in school areas and regularly giving sessions to kids in need.*

- **Mild Intellectual Disability Provision**

- *Every school have a special class attached to mainstream school for children/teens with intellectual disabilities, not just autism.*
- *More inclusion for all children with additional needs. More general learning disability classes need to be set up particularly in post primary settings.*

- **Teacher and Staff Training**

- *More specialist training for teachers and SNAs. Compulsory training when working in this area. More support and authority for teachers working in this specialist area. More recognition at government level for the needs of the most vulnerable in society. Funding not going to school but to the specialist areas.*
- *We needs teachers specifically trained in special education and with more access to multidisciplinary teams in the school.*

- **Skills and Curriculum Adaptation**

- *We need more vocational and practical schools. Smaller classes for children with additional needs. With the rise of Ai, the skill that is the most important for our children will be social skills.*
- *A much more immersive approach. The entire syllabi needs to be revisited. Educators seem to be way too soft and compliant instead of leading by example. Geography - more educational visits should be introduced. History - visits to museums Art - gallery visits Spanish - Spanish restaurants to order basic interactions and my point being that there are SO many opportunities to teach our children as the curriculum does not suit their needs. Even the LpL2 programme is entirely dependent on the teachers implementing it and in my case I don't think it is working. My child wants to learn but continues to meet road block.*

- **Therapy and Sensory Supports**

- *Mainstream schools able to cater for total inclusion. A model for speech and language assistants to be on site to work with a few school in a radius of 10km in a week similar to Current SNA then down line same model for OT assistants and Physio Assistant with a senior therapy co-ordinator in each county.*
- *In special schools there should be mandatory speech therapists, OT's, physios and behavioural therapists.*

- **Special School Funding and Expansion**

- *There needs to be enough special school places to cater for demand- not all children can cope or thrive in a mainstream setting. Mainstream can be overwhelming to a child with sensory needs, no matter how many supports are in place.*
- *Essential that special education sector is expanded and fully funded. Special schools and classes are essential, the move towards placing all children with AEN/SEN in mainstream classes should be strongly resisted, especially as teachers don't receive training. Choice must remain for parents and children. Full time therapists employed in special schools and classes.*

- **Post-Primary and Vocational Pathways**

- *Continue the focus on practical exposure. Soft skills like discussion, conversation (seriously!), presentation are absolutely critical now that those skills are disappearing in our screen-led society. Exercise, sport and P E needs dramatic enhancement. Focus on apprenticeships rather than university and more access to the practical subjects like woodwork, metalwork etc.*

- *More options for further education. I feel a lot of our children are forgotten about once they leave secondary school.*
- **Parental Choice and Advocacy**
 - *One that puts people ahead of bureaucracy.*
 - *Essential that special education sector is expanded and fully funded. Special schools and classes are essential, the move towards placing all children with AEN/SEN in mainstream classes should be strongly resisted, especially as teachers don't receive training. Choice must remain for parents and children. Full time therapists employed in special schools and classes.*
- **Down Syndrome Education Support**
 - *We need an education system that recognises the unique educational needs of children and young people with Down syndrome. One that values their emotional intelligence which if harnessed would really benefit the whole school community and society as a whole.*
 - *Support for those with mild LD in the mainstream class. More SNA support. It seems like all resources are for ASD and mod LD. So many kids with DS won't fit these.*
- **Class Size and Staffing Levels**
 - *Every school having a complex needs class. Reduced teacher: student ratio.*
 - *Smaller classes with more holistic therapies allowed to support my son in his school setting. E.g. SLT, OT.*
- **Curriculum Differentiation**
 - *For kids with special needs - something laser-focused on teaching them the basics to the best of their abilities and also emphasis on making friends and social skills.*
 - *Mainstream with special classes, fully funded and resourced to provide the differentiated curriculum required, to ensure children have a true opportunity to reach their potential.*
- **Community and Parental Advocacy**
 - *More facilities for kids with Down syndrome within the local communities.*
 - *Equality and inclusion, prescriptive to the individual child. It is not a box ticking exercise, like all neuro-typical children, each child with DS is different and has different needs so they should be treated as such to reach their full potential.*

- **Transition and Life Skills Planning**

- *Creating a supportive system so that young people with Down syndrome are not disadvantaged in accessing support for transition year. Young people with Down syndrome should have the option to do a 3 year cycle in senior cycle (separate to TY) to prepare them for adult world with the 3rd year being a bridging year between senior cycle and adult stage of their life and that 18 is the defining element in deciding when they leave school.*
- *A middle school - going from primary to secondary is a big change for our kids - a middle school even from aged 10-15; then post primary school from 15-20.*

- **Non-Autism Disability Education.**

- *Kids with DS with mild learning disabilities are not catered One that caters not just to kids with Autism when additional help is required for all, they seem to fall between the two stools of mainstream education and special schools or special classes in mainstream schools.*

- **Home-School Communication**

- *More communication between home and school, awareness of needs needed in the future enable to prepare for it.*

- **Cross Departmental Co-ordination**

- *Integrated database which can be accessed by related professionals*
- *Inclusive and diverse. Not a one size fits all. Not endless surveys asking parents and then ignoring them. Not each "new" minister starting all over again. We need continuity and cross departmental task forces. HSE, Dept. of education, Dept. of children and disability. Stop wasting our children's potential. They have so much to give. Our child is 15 and things are worse now than they ever were. I despair for her and others futures.*

Section 3

Transcript of Submission from Down Syndrome Ireland to the National Conversation on Education

On behalf of all members of Down Syndrome Ireland, I am delighted to have the opportunity to make this submission to the National Conversation on Future Education. The views highlighted in this submission are those of the members of Down Syndrome Ireland across all stages of the education journey from Pre-School to the completion of Post Primary school in mainstream and special school/class settings.

Question: What do you think is working well for your child in Education today?

Members generally expressed a positive outlook on what is working well for their children in education, with many highlighting inclusive education models, strong SNA support, and individualized instruction as key strengths. Some also noted benefits from small class sizes, quality teaching staff, and opportunities for peer integration. A few responses emphasized the importance of a supportive school environment and curriculum flexibility. While most feedback was favourable, a minority of members raised concerns about staff training, assessment practices, and limited post-primary options. Overall, tailored support and inclusive practices were valued, although some challenges have been identified in consistency and resources.

Areas identified by members as working well for their child in education today are: (in descending order of priority):

- Inclusive Education Models
- SNA Support and Access
- Individualised and Differentiated Instruction
- Peer Relationships and Integration
- Specialized Support Services
- Teacher and Staff Quality
- Small Class Size
- Curriculum Flexibility and Adaptation
- Life and Daily Living Skills
- School Environment and Ethos
- Social and Communication Skills
- Routine and Structure

- Staffing Levels and Ratios
- Disability-Specific Instruction
- Arts and Enrichment Activities
- Early Intervention Programmes
- Dual and Hybrid Placement Models
- Digital Technology Integration
- School Transportation

Question: What do you think could be improved for your child in Education today?

Members shared a range of views with a central focus on inclusion and support for students with Down syndrome. Many highlighted the need for improved mainstream school inclusion, better teacher training for inclusive practices, and increased access to special needs assistants and therapy services. Some also called for more special class availability, equitable resources, and Down syndrome-specific educational approaches. A few members noted challenges with curriculum differentiation and peer socialization. While some positive experiences were mentioned, most responses emphasized gaps in support and resources.

Areas identified by members as needing improvement for their child in education today are: (in descending order of priority):

- Mainstream School Inclusion
- Special Class Availability & Placement
- Teacher Training for Inclusion
- Therapy Services in Schools
- Special Needs Assistant Staffing
- Speech & Language Therapy Services
- Individualised Education Plans
- Special Education Support Hours
- Literacy & Numeracy Instruction
- Equitable Resource Allocation
- Curriculum Differentiation
- Staff Continuity & Retention
- Home-School Communication
- Peer Socialisation Opportunities

- Down Syndrome Specific Education
- Educational Resources and Materials
- Life Skills Instruction
- Early Intervention Services

Question: What needs do you think are becoming more important for your child in Education today?

Members highlighted a growing importance on life and social skills development, with many emphasizing the need for meaningful inclusion in mainstream education. Support for teacher collaboration, access to special needs assistants, improved social inclusion and peer interaction were also frequently mentioned. Some members stressed the need for more special class availability, tailored curriculum design, and enhanced literacy and writing support. A notable minority expressed frustration with limited resources, insufficient special education placements, and gaps in support for transitions and future planning. Overall, feedback reflects a desire for more inclusive, individualized, and well-supported educational experiences.

Areas identified by members as becoming more important for their child in education today are: (in descending order of priority):

- Life and Social Skills Development
- Individualised Curriculum Design
- Educational Support Provision
- Mainstream Education Inclusion
- Transition and Future Planning
- Special Class Availability
- Speech and Language Therapy
- Literacy & Writing Skills
- Social Inclusion and Peer Interaction
- Therapeutic Services Access
- Teacher and Staff Collaboration
- Technology for Learning
- Special Needs Assistant Support
- Information Systems and Co-ordination
- Physical and Practical Activities

- Digital and Personal Safety
- Mental Health and Emotional Support
- Sensory Needs Accommodation
- Early Intervention Waiting Times

Question: What, if anything, is already changing in Education to meet your child's needs?

Member's responses reflect range of sentiment regarding recent changes in education for children with Down syndrome. Many parents note improvements such as increased access to special education classes, more individualized support, and greater use of educational technology. Some highlight enhanced teacher training and a more inclusive school culture. However, several express concern about limited resources, insufficient support for non-autistic children with Down syndrome, and slow progress in adapting policies. A few feel changes are minimal or unclear. Overall, while some positive steps are recognized, many members still identify gaps in meeting their children's needs.

Areas identified by members as already changing in education to meet their child's needs (in descending order of priority):

- School Inclusion Practices
- Special Education Class Access
- Individualised Student Support
- Curriculum Adaptation & Skills
- School Based Therapeutic Services
- Student Engagement and Wellbeing
- Special Needs Assistant Staffing
- Autism Policy and Education
- Down Syndrome Teacher Development
- Educational Technology Support
- Assessment for Support Services
- Academic Achievement and Inclusion
- Down Syndrome Education Awareness
- Play and Physical Learning
- School – Parent Communication
- Educational Funding Access

- Education Policy Direction
- Home –Based Education Responsibility

Question: What kind of Education system do you think we need in the years ahead?

Members shared a range of views on the future education system. Most emphasized the importance of flexible integration between mainstream and special classes, highlighting the need for both inclusive opportunities and specialized support. Many called for expanded special needs services, increased funding, and more special school places. Parental choice, teacher training in special education, and better access to therapies and sensory supports were also frequently mentioned. Some stressed the value of vocational pathways and curriculum adaptation to individual needs. A notable minority expressed concerns about one-size-fits-all approaches and advocated for targeted provisions for mild intellectual disabilities. Overall, feedback underscored a desire for a well-resourced, individualized system that balances inclusion with adaptations and accommodations for pupils with Down syndrome

Areas identified by members as to the kind of education system needed to meet their child's needs in the years ahead?

- Inclusive Education Models
- Mainstream and Special Class Integration
- Individualised Education Approaches
- Special Needs Support Services
- Mild Intellectual Disability Provision
- Teacher and Staff Training
- Skills and Curriculum Adaptation
- Therapy and Sensory Supports
- Special School Funding and Expansion
- Post-Primary and Vocational Pathways
- Parental Choice and Advocacy
- Down Syndrome Education Support
- Class Size and Staffing Levels
- Curriculum Differentiation
- Community and Parental Advocacy
- Transition and Life Skills Planning

- Non-Autism Disability Education
- Home-School Communication
- Cross Departmental Co-ordination

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the shaping of Ireland's education system for decades to come.

Dr Fidelma Brady

Head of Education – Down Syndrome Ireland

February 23rd 2026

