

## **Plean Scoile (School Plan) Special Classes for Children with Autism, July 2010**

See also addendum re: Special Pre-School Class for Children with Autism, June 2013

---

### **Background**

The Board of Management took the decision during the 2007-2008 school year to offer a special class option for children with autism, following discussions with interested families, staff, the National Council for Special Education and other schools with such provision in the Wexford, Wicklow and Dublin areas.

The special class option helps the Board to further meet the diverse educational needs of the children/families who want to attend our school.

The first pupils were enrolled in the special class in September 2008. Purpose-built permanent accommodation was constructed during 2009 and a second special class will open at the school in September 2010, based on rising enrolments.

The multid denominational, co-educational, child-centred and democratically-run principles of *Educate Together* schools underpin all aspects of school life, including the workings of our special classes.

This policy document follows review meetings with the parents of children enrolled in the special class during 2008-2009, as well as classroom observations and meetings with the special class teacher & special needs assistants, and a further visit to a more established 'autism unit.'

A draft of this document was circulated amongst all classroom staff and all parents of children enrolled in the special class (April, May, and June 2010.) Feedback was taken into account and this final document was ratified as school policy by the Board of Management (July 2010.) Aspects of the policy will be reviewed during 2011 and further areas will be identified for development.

### **Literature**

Policy and practice with regard to our special classes is informed by a number of sources, training events and publications, including:

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1999.) *Primary School Curriculum*.
- Autism Working Group, Department of Education Northern Ireland (2008.) *Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Guide to Classroom Practice*.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2007.) *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*.
- Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (2006.) *An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders*.
- Sarah Buckley, Blánaid Gavin and Fiona McNicholas (2009.) *Mental Health in Children & Adolescents*.
- Carol Gray, (2001.) *My Social Stories Book*.
- Carol Gray, (2009.) *The New Social Stories Book*, Illustrated Edition.
- Lori Frost, (2002.) *The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)*.
- Special Education Support Service, (2008.) *TEACCH Training Notebook*.
- Online journal 'newhorizons.org,' (various.) *Including Children with Autism in Inclusive Preschools: Strategies that Work and Bibliotherapy for the Inclusive Classroom*.
- J. Tyler Fovel, (2002.) *The ABA Program Companion*.
- Jed E. Baker, (2003.) *Social Skills Training*.
- Laurie Eckenrode, (2004.) *Tasks Galore for the Real World*, (4 volumes: from TEACCH programme.)
- Isabel Cohen, *Hands On: How to use Brain Gym in the Classroom*.
- Kelly McKinnon, (2002.) *Social Skills Solutions, : A Hands on Manual for teaching social skills to children with autism*
- Charlotte Lynch, (2006.) *Early Communication Skills*.
- Ron Leaf, *A Work in Progress: Behaviour Management Strategies and a Curriculum for Intensive Behavioural Treatment of Autism*
- Steven E. Gutstein, (2006.) *Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children*.
- Andy Bondy, (2002.) *The Pyramid Approach to Education: Lessons Plans for Young Children*. (Volume 1)
- Middletown Centre for Autism, (2008.) *An Introduction to Sensory Integration*.

## **Positive language**

We use the term 'special class(es) for children with autism.' We do not use the term 'autism unit' (although this term may be used in some Department of Education & Skills and National Council for Special Education correspondence.) On a day-to-day basis, we refer to 'Nancy's class' i.e. we use the current teacher's first name (as is the practice throughout the school.)

Other more positive terms that we find useful include: children with autism or children on the autism spectrum (rather than 'autistic children,') and 'typically developing children' (rather than 'normal children.')

Where young typically developing children have questions about the personality or behaviours of a child on the autism spectrum we answer those questions in a matter-of-fact, positive way. Often, practical differences are explained ('usually he does that when he's excited – just like you giggle when you're excited;' 'he doesn't yet know as many words as you – point to the toy as well,' etc.) Sometimes, depending on the age of the children it may be appropriate to use the term 'autism,' if that would help avoid misunderstandings. This would be done in consultation with parents.

## **Pre-enrolment (see also the school's general enrolment policy)**

Parents and guardians of children with a medical diagnosis\* specifying Autism may chose to pre-enrol their child in a mainstream class or (in consultation with the Principal or the Assistant Principal\*\*) our Special Classes for Children with Autism.

(\*Assessment and classification of autism or autistic spectrum disorder by a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist using DSM-IV or ICD-10 criteria **OR** multi-disciplinary assessment of same by a professional team [including a clinical psychologist.]

(\*\*Reports on the child should include a recommendation for special class placement because his/her initial needs are unlikely to be met in a whole time mainstream classroom environment.)

Places in the special classes are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, and families are advised to make contact with the school soon after a diagnosis (and recommendation regarding the child's schooling) becomes available.

## **Role of the school at pre-enrolment stage**

The Principal (or the Assistant Principal) will meet with parents to discuss their child's strengths and needs.

Parents would be fully informed re: this school, including the various workings of the mainstream and special classes. Parents would also be informed of possible alternatives, such as special schools.

Existing school, psychological, medical, speech/language, occupational therapy and other reports will be considered. Staff will arrange to observe the child in his/her pre-school or some other setting. The Principal/Assistant Principal may also (with parents' permission) consult with the professionals who prepared reports on the child and the professionals with whom the school has an existing relationship (such as our National Educational Psychological Service psychologist) before making a recommendation to parents regarding the perceived suitability, or otherwise, of enrolling the child in a special class.

Where parents chose to proceed with the special class option, the principal shall make a report to the school's Board of Management, with whom the final decision on enrolment rests. (The principal may also recommend that the decision be deferred, pending the receipt of further information on the child.)

The school would also involve the family in planning for the child's enrolment, (e.g. a transition programme, identifying priority needs, reinforcers questionnaire, special diets, alternative treatments, etc.)

### **Integration and inclusion**

It is hoped that the children entering our special classes would not require this provision for the duration of their primary school education. Integration with typically developing peers in inclusive mainstream classroom environments, in so far as possible, is the Board's aim.

The Board of Management's approach to integration is also framed by the *Educate Together* 'children of the school' model: i.e. 'the school is a collective organisation that strives to address the individual needs of every child. However, any school must balance these needs with the general interests of all the children.'

The nature of all integration shall be determined by the teaching staff, following reviews at appropriate intervals and consultation with the child's parents.

Increasing (and full) integration will be put in place for children who are successful in the integrated setting. (There would be an expectation that the child is capable of meaningful learning and functioning within the setting.)

Partial integration will take the form of contact during specific situations or curriculum areas, where particular skills & interests and/or learning can be advanced: e.g. structured social play groups, music lessons, drama, school trips, maths lessons, Social Personal & Health Education (SPHE) lessons, visual arts, school assemblies, class or school celebrations, etc.

The minimum level of contact for all pupils (limited integration) will include: some lunchtimes, some group activities and some playground breaks.

This policy document also reiterates the *Educate Together* commitment to develop a school culture and practice in which the identity of every child is given active support. In practice, this commits the school to a number of undertakings:

- staff continuing to access training in relation to the education of children with autism (through the Special Education Support Service or other providers)
- the Assistant Principal researching and/or developing inclusive, differentiated teaching practices; reporting on and demonstrating same to staff; taking a lead role in fostering the sustained implementation of such practices throughout the school. (Ref: In-school management structures)
- special class teachers and mainstream class teachers, in so far as possible, identifying and implementing the supports and accommodations that children with autism may need to be successful in typical (and/or desirable) school activities
- the school principal convening an annual whole-school special needs awareness week ('Diversity Week') that engages our parents, pupils and staff (e.g. evening seminar for parents, with input by guest professional and parent of a child on the autism spectrum; age appropriate activities and lessons for all the classes; different special education themes each year, etc.)
- pupils and teachers devising regular connections between our special classes and a number of our mainstream classes, e.g. weekly shared activity, such as a motor skills obstacle course; developing talking partner systems; developing playground buddy systems, etc.
- the school principal and the special class teachers working to increase the visibility of the special classes amongst the wider school community (e.g. school prospectus and school website, school newsletters, corridor displays, school assemblies, engaging with the Parent Teacher Association, etc.)
- Board of Management members enabling the implementation of all such initiatives.

## Teaching and learning

The children will access a curriculum based on the *Primary School Curriculum* that is matched to their needs and capacities through carefully planned individual learning activities and through the use of differentiation strategies in group activities. Subject areas include: English, maths, social, environmental and scientific education (SESE,) social, personal and health education (SPHE,) music, visual arts, drama and physical education. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* will be used to augment the implementation of the curriculum.

The special class teachers shall continue to prepare an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each child. (A sample is attached to this document.)

Preparation of the IEP will be done in consultation with the child's parents and in liaison the mainstream class teachers.

For new pupils, a substantial draft of each IEP will be completed within six weeks of the first term (or within six weeks of the child starting school.)

The special class teachers will review all the children's IEP's no less than every six months, in consultation with the child's parents and in liaison with the other staff who work with the child (and other professionals, as appropriate.)

An eclectic approach shall continue to be used within the special classes, that is, a range of teaching approaches (including those used in the school's mainstream classes) shall be employed, based on the individual needs of the children.

The main approaches are as follows: play, language through play, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS,) Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH,) Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA,) Intensive Interaction & Relationship Development and Floortime. Social Stories will also be used.

The assessment tools in use in the special classes (in addition to the tools in use in our other settings, Ref: *Plean Scoile* for Assessment) are: where appropriate to the needs of the child, the Assessment of Basic Learning and Language Skills (ABLLS.) The ABLLS will usually be administered at the following intervals: 6 or 12 months.

Alternatively, beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, the Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment and Placement Programme (VB-Mapp, by Mark L. Sundberg) will be used. The VB-MAPP is a criterion-referenced assessment tool, curriculum guide, and skill tracking system that is designed for children with autism, and other individuals who demonstrate language delays.

Additionally, where appropriate, the checklists from *A Work in Progress: Behaviour Management Strategies & A Curriculum for Intensive Behavioural Treatment of Autism* (Roy Leaf) may be used.

The implementation of the Primary School Curriculum will be enhanced through a programme of trips to local places, designed to help further prepare the children for successful living in our community (playground visits, coffee shop, shopping tasks, post office, forest walk, horse riding lessons, etc.) Typically developing peers may also participate in elements of this programme.

The school will run a July programme in 2010, on a trial basis. This programme will be funded by the Department of Education & Skills. The Board of Management will evaluate the success or otherwise of the programme during October/November 2010. (The Board has already decided that the running of a July programme in any school year would be dependent on the availability of our own teachers and special needs assistants.)

## **Staffing and continuing professional development**

The National Council for Special Education sanctions the employment of staff as follows: one registered teacher and two special needs assistants (SNA's) per six-pupil class.

Further SNA's may be applied for in certain circumstances, e.g. where a child has particularly significant care needs, which cannot be met by the class SNA's and may warrant the allocation of additional SNA support.

The school principal will progress applications for additional SNA's if he deems this to be necessary, in consultation with the child's parents.

In most cases, SNA's will not be assigned to individual children. They will be assigned to a classroom or to a group (or pair) of pupils. The SNA's will work across different pupils so that the children learn to accept change and learn to generalise behaviour. While this may result in some short-term disruption (in terms of absolute consistency,) it will be of benefit to the children in the longer term.

The special class teachers and SNA's have experience of, or an interest in, working with children with Autism.

The Board will continue to support the accessing of Continuing Professional Development by staff. In general, relevant specialist training is accessed via the Special Education Support Service.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) accessed by teachers 2008-2010: Studio 3 Behaviour Management & Physical Intervention (whole-staff summer course, July 2008,) An Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders (whole-staff in-school seminar, autumn 2008,) ABBLs assessment, Individual Planning for Pupils with ASD's, TEACCH 5 day course, Sensory Motor in Relation to ASD's.

CPD accessed by SNA's 2008-2010: Studio 3 Behaviour Management & Physical Intervention (whole-staff summer course, July 2008,) An Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders (whole-staff in-school seminar, autumn 2008,) SESS residential course for SNA's, (spring 2009.)

Some disruption to the workings of the special classes can be expected when the special class teachers and/or the special needs assistants access training courses. Parents will be given as much notice as possible in these cases.

## **Multidisciplinary support**

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides educational psychology support to the school. This can include support re: the learning, behaviour, social and/or emotional development of individual children, through consultation and assessment.

~~No Health Service Executive (HSE) therapies are provided at the school (such as Occupational Therapy and Speech/Language Therapy.) However, where a child accesses such supports in a local clinic or health centre these professionals will liaise with the special class teachers and/or visit the school from time to time.~~

~~The principal will again apply to the HSE to provide the children's speech and language therapy sessions within the school setting. However, a previous such request (2008) was not successful.~~

*Update regarding HSE support: The special classes are now supported by a Speech/Language Therapist. An occupational therapist supports individual pupils, and delivers some therapy sessions at the school.*

## **Equipment and materials**

The Board of Management will continue to finance the purchase of necessary equipment and materials, as funds allow.

The principal will continue to liaise with the senior occupational therapist with regard to the identification of suitable equipment for the special classes and arrange for the purchase same, as funds allow.

Where the occupational therapist or speech/language therapist makes recommendations regarding specialist equipment for individual children the principal will apply for grant aid from the Department of Education & Skills or the National Council for Special Education. Generally, the school can only arrange for the purchase of such equipment if the grant application is successful.

## **Code of behaviour**

The school's existing Code of Behaviour applies to all school settings and activities, including the workings of the special classes.

The issue of physical behaviour/physical aggression could become more pertinent as the children grow older.

Parents should note that this school will not employ any regular 'restraint' or 'secure-unit' type model for older (or physically strong) pupils i.e. if the school felt that we could do no more for any child in this regard we would engage with parents about possible alternative placements.

## **Key roles and responsibilities**

*The responsibilities of the special class teacher include:*

- Being the main point of contact for the child's parents
- Involving parents in the educational process (e.g. Individual Education Plans (IEP's,) home-school journals, participation in some classroom/school activities, etc.)
- Preparing a new pupil's IEP within 6 weeks of the first term of the school year, in consultation with parents & in liaison with other staff working with the child
- Initiating a review of that IEP within 6 months (usually during Term 2)
- Planning and implementing educational provision for the children enrolled in the special class. Ensuring breadth and balance (SESE, arts, SPHE, etc. as well as language & maths, etc.) Using long- and short-term planning to enable progression over time.
- Coordinating the supporting work of the special needs assistants on an ongoing basis
- Working with the mainstream class teacher to identify regular opportunities for integration
- Working with the mainstream class teacher to identify and implement accommodations that the child with autism may need to be successful in the mainstream classroom

*The responsibilities of the mainstream class teacher include:*

- Working with the special class teacher to identify regular opportunities for integration, (e.g. regular/timetabled activities or lessons; once-off class or school activities, etc.)
- Working with the special class teacher (and special needs assistants) to implement accommodations that the child with autism may need to be successful in the mainstream classroom, (e.g. controlling teaching vocabulary, using additional visual supports, modifying behavioural programmes, co-teaching scenarios, etc.)

*The duties of the special needs assistants include (as assigned by the school principal or another teacher as determined by the principal :)*

- Assisting with the care/safety/supervision needs of the children – in the classrooms and around the school, on the playground and on school trips
- Assisting with behavioural management programmes
- Guiding the child through tasks and activities designed by the special class teacher or the mainstream class teacher
- Data collection/reporting on progress, as determined by the special class teacher
- Providing special assistance to the children, as necessary (e.g. using computers and other equipment, help with written tasks, etc.)
- Preparing materials/resources for the children, under the guidance of the special class teacher or the mainstream class teacher

*The responsibilities of the assistant principal include:*

- Convening (and in some cases chairing) meetings as follows:
- September: convene the first meeting of the special class teacher and the mainstream class teacher
- October: presentation of child's IEP (substantial draft.) Participants: special class teacher, parents, assistant principal. Arrange for mainstream class teacher and special needs assistant to attend part of this meeting.
- April or May: formal review of progress. Participants: special class teacher and parents. Arrange for assistant principal, mainstream class teacher and SNA to attend part of this meeting.
- Please note that the above meetings are in addition to the less formal contacts between all parties during the school year.

*The responsibilities of the principal include:*

- Making prompt and reasonable judgements on the unresolved matters that may arise from time to time, using the 'children of the school' model: i.e. 'the school is a collective organisation that strives to address the individual needs of every child. However, any school must balance these needs with the general interests of all the children.'

## **Addendum: Special Pre-School Class for Children with Autism, June 2013**

In spring 2013 the school's Board of Management agreed to a request from the National Council for Special Education to open a special pre-school class for children with autism. The Board's decision followed an examination of new & existing autism services in the north-Wexford area and consultations with school staff.

The pre-school class will open at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, (29<sup>th</sup> August 2013.)

Similar to our existing special classes for school-age children, the pre-school class will have 6 pupil places and will be staffed by one qualified primary school teacher and two special needs assistants. **A child can take up a place in the pre-school class on/after his/her third birthday. The upper age for inclusion in this class is five.** (A child cannot be six during the school year.) Children must have a diagnosis of autism, along with a recommendation for special pre-school placement (because their needs cannot be met in a mainstream pre-school environment.) Places will be allocated on a 'first-come-first-served' basis.

**Admission to our special pre-school class does not imply that the child will later enter the mainstream classes or school-age special classes at Gorey Educate Together.** The aim of the pre-school intervention is to help prepare the child for entry to his/her local mainstream school. (Parents interested in enrolling children in the mainstream classes or school-age special classes at Gorey Educate Together must adhere to the school's existing Enrolment Policy.)

**Teaching and Learning:** Please see page 4 of this document. The TEACCH pre-school curriculum (with PEP3 assessment tool,) along with *Aistear* (The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework) may also be used as resources in the special pre-school class.

**Integration & Inclusion:** See page 3. Unlike our existing special classes for school-age children, pupils attending the pre-school will not be paired with our mainstream classes.

**Multi-disciplinary support:** See page 5. The National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) does not provide educational psychology support to pre-school children. At this stage, the level of Health Service Executive (HSE) support for the new pre-school class remains unclear.