



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

# **A New System for Allocating Special Needs Assistants to Mainstream Schools**

***The Right Supports at the Right Time  
for Students with Additional Care Needs***

## A Guide for Parents/ Guardians and Students

September 2020



# About this guide

The Department of Education and Skills is changing the way it allocates Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) within mainstream schools.

This is part of a wider range of changes to the way schools support students with special educational needs.

This guide explains:

- The changes to the way SNAs are allocated to schools; and
- What this means for your child.

## What are the main changes?

- Students no longer require a diagnosis of disability or a professional report to access SNA Support.
- Schools will no longer have to apply separately for SNA support for every student who needs support for care needs.
- Schools will get their allocation of SNA resources in advance of the school year.
- Schools will have greater freedom to use their SNA resources flexibly so that they can provide the greatest level of support to students with the greatest level of need.

## Why is the system changing?

In 2018, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published a review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme. The review found that, while students, parents and schools highly value the SNA scheme, some changes were needed. Among other things, it recommended that:

- Schools receive an SNA allocation in advance of the school year, so they can plan and decide how best to meet the additional care needs of all their students; and
- SNA support should focus on making students as independent as possible, as early as possible, so that they are supported towards living independent lives when they leave school.

## What's better about the new system?

### For students and parents

- Students who need the most help will receive that help quickly.
- By getting the right help at the right time, students will be supported to become as independent as possible, as early as possible.
- Schools will now put a care plan in place to support students to become more independent. This plan will be included in the Student Support File that schools already use to plan other supports for their students.
- Parents and students will be more involved in making and reviewing this plan.

### For schools

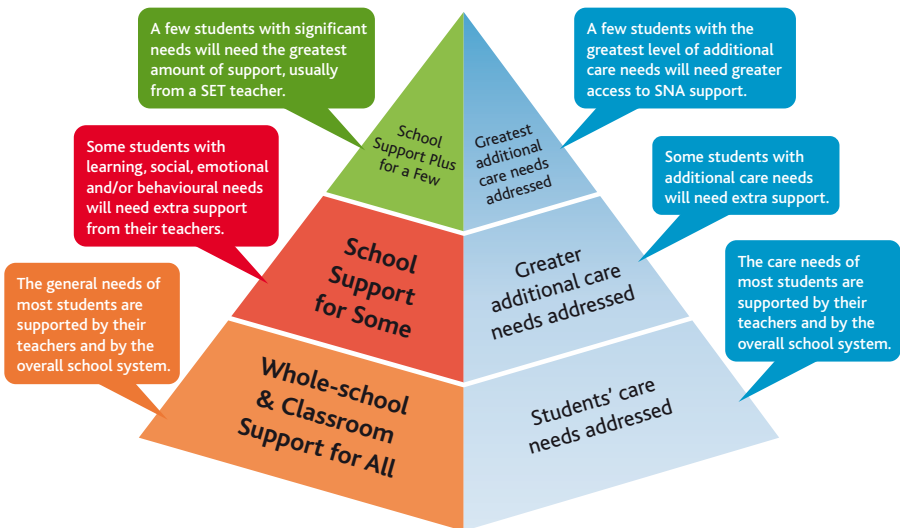
- Schools can make quicker decisions about allocating SNA support.
- Schools can plan ahead and be more flexible with how they allocate support for students with care needs. For example, the school can:
  - ▶ Make changes if a new student with care needs enrolls in the school.
  - ▶ Make changes if another student needs a little more support.
  - ▶ Make changes where a student has developed independence and needs a little less support.
- Schools can allocate SNA support to students who show evidence of additional care needs in school, without needing a professional report diagnosing a disability.

## How much of a change will this be for schools?

The new way of allocating SNAs in schools will use the same system that is already in place in schools, i.e. the Continuum of Support (CoS) – see figure 1.

Schools already use the CoS to help them to decide how best to support their students' needs. The left hand side of the diagram shows how schools provide this support. In line with DES guidelines, schools prioritise extra teacher support to students based on their identified needs. Students with the greatest learning, behaviour, social or emotional needs get the greatest level of teacher support. The support each student gets is recorded in their Student Support File so that their progress can be regularly reviewed.

Figure 1: Continuum of Support (CoS)



The right hand side of the diagram shows how SNA support for students with care needs will now be decided in a similar way; i.e. those with the greatest level of additional care needs will get greater access to SNA support. The additional care need support each student gets will also be recorded in their Student Support File (which includes their Student Support Plan), so that their progress can be regularly reviewed.

## How will schools decide who gets SNA support?

Schools have been given guidelines to help them allocate their SNA resources to the students who need them most. The guidelines are available from your child's school. At all times, schools must ensure that students with the highest level of additional care needs get the greatest level of support.

There are six steps for schools to follow in making decisions about how to allocate their SNA support. This is called the Six-Step Decision-Making Process. Parents and students are involved in this process. The six steps are:

- 1) Identify the student's additional care needs.
- 2) Set goals and targets and write these in the Student Support File, and Student Support Plan.
- 3) Plan and record the type and level of support the student needs to meet the goals and targets.
- 4) Set a deadline to achieve the goals and targets.
- 5) Review the Student Support Plan often.
- 6) Make changes if the plan is not working.

## What kind of care needs qualify for SNA support?

Sometimes, a teacher can make simple changes in the classroom to address a care need. At other times, support from an SNA may be needed.

To qualify for SNA support a student's care needs must be of such significance that they are beyond that which can be provided for by the student's class teacher or by other teaching staff or by modifications to the school environment.

For example, students with additional care needs often include those who need help with feeding, toileting, mobility and orientation, severe communication difficulties and supervision. Additional primary care needs are detailed in Circular 30/2014.

The main goal of any support is to increase the student's independent living skills and confidence. This means the student is given 'just enough' support to help them to take part in school and develop their independence as early as possible, so that they are supported towards living independent lives when they leave school.

## **Will my child get SNA support if they already have a diagnosis of disability or if the HSE or other professionals recommend access to SNA support?**

Your child will get support based on their care needs, not their diagnosis or disability. The school will use the Six-Step Decision-Making Process to identify your child's care needs and to decide how best to meet them.

For example, your child's care needs could be met by:

- Using assistive technology such as a laptop, touch screen or screen reader
- Adapting the curriculum or learning environment
- Support from a special education teacher (SET) or
- Support from an SNA.

In the new system, SNA support is just one of a range of additional care supports available for students. Schools will use all information available to them to decide the level of care support each student needs. If a professional report is available, schools will consider this too. The school will allocate all its SNA resources to its students in line with their care needs.

## **Are school principals and teachers equipped to make decisions about my child's support needs that previously required a professional report?**

School principals and teachers know a lot about their students' development and additional needs, and about the barriers they face in learning and taking part in school. Every student develops in their own way, so schools try to provide a learning environment where students can develop in line with their potential.

Before making any decisions, the school principal and your child's teacher will talk with you about the types of strategies and responses that are helpful at home and in school. The school will also take into account professional reports, if these are available.

## **Will my child still be able to access professional support or an assessment, if needed?**

Yes. Children can still access professional support or an assessment, if needed, through the relevant local services or through school-based services.

## **Will I be involved in decisions about my child's support plan, for example when they transition from primary to post-primary school.**

Yes. Schools and parents will work together to identify and respond to the needs of students with additional care needs. Students also have a voice in this planning, if appropriate.

If additional care needs are identified, additional care support targets will be recorded in your child's Student Support File. This file includes your child's Student Support Plan.

This file contains information on your child's long-term care goals, short-term care targets, and the strategies and resources needed to help them achieve their targets within an agreed time.

## **What happens if a school believes that it has not been given enough SNA resources?**

If the school believes that it does not have enough SNA resources to meet the additional care needs of enrolled students, the school can apply to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) for a review of their SNA allocation.



## Will the school be able to enrol my child if it does not have enough SNA resources?

Yes. Your child will not be refused enrolment on the grounds that the school does not have enough SNAs to meet their additional care needs.

All schools have been allocated SNA resources based on the school's profile which includes the number of students with complex needs in the school. The intention is that all schools will have adequate resources to provide additional care support for all students who need it, including new students. Resources should be allocated by schools to students with the greatest additional care needs.

If a school requires additional SNA support because, for example, a new student with significant needs enrolls in the school, then the school can apply to the NCSE for additional support.

If your child is refused enrolment to a school, you may appeal to the Section 29 Appeal Committee. You can find details of how to appeal under the Parents' tab on the Department of Education and Skills website, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) or search for Section 29 Appeals.

## What if I don't agree with the level of support being given to my child?

Under the new system, schools must make sure that students with the highest level of need get the greatest level of support.

Schools have been given guidelines to help them make fair and clear decisions about how to allocate support for students with additional care needs. This includes getting the views of parents or guardians at an early stage.

If you have concerns about the level or type of support your child is getting, you should talk first with your child's class or subject teacher or their special education teacher. You could also talk with the school principal. If, after this, you are still not satisfied, you can bring your concern to the Chairperson of the school's Board of Management.

## Where can I get more information?

- [Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme.](#)
- [DES Circular 0030/2014](#) has a full list of additional care needs which may qualify for special needs assistance.
- [Contact list for your local Special Education Needs Organiser.](#)
- [The NCSE: Information booklets for parents.](#)
- [The National Educational Psychological Service: Information for Parents.](#)



