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in Schools in Ireland

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Including Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Schools in Ireland

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The Department of Education and Science in Ireland has recently drawn up a set of planning and design guidelines for learning spaces for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post primary schools.

The document entitled “Planning & Design Guidelines for Accommodation for Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Primary & Post Primary Schools” (Technical Guidance Document 026) will shortly be published on the Department’s website at www.education.ie.

These guidelines offer information on space planning and design for school principals, boards of management and designers to make permanent learning facilities available for pupils with special educational needs across the 26 counties of Ireland. The guidelines reflect many of the recent changes in the country’s educational system, changes that have placed greater demands on schools for additional space to account for a growing range of teaching and support services for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders, emotional disturbance and/or behaviour problems, speech and language difficulties, hearing impairment, visual impairment, multi-sensory impairment, and other needs.

BACKGROUND

A number of mainstream schools, mainly at primary level, have been providing classrooms for pupils with special educational needs for some time, mainly in the area of autistic spectrum disorders; however the type and quality of physical infrastructure needed to deliver these classes has often been less than ideal. Classrooms at post primary level were less common, though in 1999 the Department helped set up a special education facility for teaching up to 15 pupils with a moderate general learning disability in a post primary school in County Offaly, Ireland. The project went ahead in 2001, and is today fully operational; this has become one of the models of successful integrated special needs provision in the country.

The focus has now moved towards a more integrated service provision for pupils with special educational needs in the mild/moderate spectrum. These guidelines will now, for the first time, establish a clear set of physical parameters for schools and designers in providing a suite of learning accommodation for these pupils within the mainstream school setting. The Department, working with the Special Educational Needs Organiser, will identify suitable schools for this accommodation, based on a set of criteria, and will work closely with these schools and their boards of management to establish the special needs element and to fund the necessary physical and teaching resources.

SPACES

The spaces can typically be provided either as an extension to an existing mainstream primary or post primary school, or as part of a new primary or post primary school design; the surface area totals 470 m² for primary schools and 552 m² for post primary schools. The basis is a suite of two general classrooms of 70 m² linked by a central activities area. Ancillary spaces include an individual withdrawal room off each classroom, fully assisted toileting with a level-entry shower accessible from each classroom, a multi-sensory room, a para-educational room, a linen/slucie room, storage, and an office and toilets for staff. Outside are a dedicated secure play area (hard and soft play) and a sensory garden, as well as additional car parking.



Special education facility for primary schools: exemplar floor plan (Department of Education and Science, Ireland)

INCLUSIVITY AND FLEXIBILITY

There are two key objectives in meeting the challenges posed by providing for pupils with special educational needs. These are *inclusivity* and *flexibility*. The Department's view is that for all new school building projects, the spaces for pupils with special educational needs must be appropriately located within the design proposal in order to promote and develop *inclusivity*. All pupils, regardless of ability,

should be able to enter via the main entrance to the school building on a daily basis and participate in their education in an inclusive manner. Locating their spaces in a remote, isolated part of the building or in a stand-alone building, where contact and social development opportunities with the main school population would be difficult to promote, is not acceptable.

It is equally important that the layout and quality of the design provides *flexibility* for the school and support staff in adequately supporting its pupils. A typical example would be the classroom layout which may change on a regular basis according to daily needs. Fixed partitions and immobile furniture are not recommended as they would not offer the required level of flexibility to adapt the space to meet the user needs.

From time to time “reverse inclusion” may take place, *i.e.* where mainstream pupils are included with pupils with special educational needs for curricular activities. Flexibility to adapt the teaching space is critical in order to facilitate reverse inclusion and to ensure that the physical layout of the spaces does not restrict or hinder the school’s curricular programme.

DESIGN SOLUTIONS

The guidelines deal in some detail with the design considerations which need to be incorporated into the physical building structure. The range of special needs is vast and the design solutions should accommodate all needs however diverse their requirements. For example, some pupils with autistic spectrum disorders can display extreme sensitivity to sensory stimulation: sound, light, colour, smell and pattern. It is critical therefore that the building design for these pupils be aimed at reducing environmental stimuli through directing attention to the amount and type of visual, aural, tactile and olfactory stimulation. Conversely, pupils who have a visual impairment depend greatly on auditory and tactile cues within the building, and its design should reflect this need.

In addition, the drive for inclusion requires the designer to mesh the mainstream spaces and special needs elements in a seamless manner both internally and externally. The Department expects schools and their design teams to adopt pragmatic, cost effective approaches to ensure the continuum of design solutions, particularly in spaces where special educational pupils require regular access to the mainstream school (*e.g.* the general purpose room and circulation areas). Examples of a cost effective approach include the use of appropriate colour, floor coverings, control of natural light and shade, avoidance of strong patterns and textures, acoustic modification of the internal environment, and high frequency light fittings.

While the guidelines emphasise providing a pleasant educational environment, designers should carefully consider the selection of materials and the detailing and design of services to ensure the safety of all. Some pupils can become quite distressed and occasionally exhibit challenging behaviour; finishes and fittings should eliminate opportunities for self-injury. Guidance is given on the appropriate use of floor coverings, wall and ceiling finishes, acoustics, glazing, door ironmongery, daylighting, mechanical and electrical services, and furniture and fittings.

The document also lists typical spaces and their surface areas for primary and post primary schools and presents a floor plan of an exemplar scheme which shows the optimum adjacencies and relationship between these spaces for a primary school setting.

CONCLUSION

These guidelines are seen as a further positive step towards integrating pupils with special needs into mainstream schooling. They will be enhanced and updated on a regular basis to reflect the changing and challenging needs of these pupils and their environment. A number of these accommodation suites are already under construction and more are due for completion over the coming years.

Pupils with severe and profound physical and intellectual disabilities including multiple disabilities are not specifically covered by this guidance document. The Department recognises that those pupils require intensive care and support in special schools, a number of which exist across the country. Due to the specific space and design requirements for that group, the Department will develop separate guidance for those schools in the future.

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