

Briefing Note for Mr. Conor Lenihan, T.D.

Minister for Science, Technology, Innovation & Natural Resources
Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment

Special Classes for pupils with a Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD)

1. In February 2009, the Department notified 119 schools to suppress 128 special classes for pupils with a mild General Learning Disability with effect from 31 August 2009.

2. Teacher allocations to schools typically increase or decrease depending on pupil enrolment. In the case of classes for MGLD the normal pupil teacher ratio that applies is 11:1. The Department however permits schools to retain a teaching post where it has a minimum of 9 pupils in the class.

X The Department reviewed enrolment numbers in all MGLD special classes and found that 128 classes did not have the minimum number of pupils required to retain the special class teacher. This was the sole criteria for selection of schools in this regard. There are currently 534 pupils enrolled in these classes. Over half of the classes have five or fewer children.

The remaining MGLD special classes have nine pupils or more and will retain the teaching post unless enrolment falls below that level.

3. The special classes which are to close pre-date the 2005 General Allocation Model of allocating additional teacher support to schools to enable them to meet the needs of pupils with mild general learning disabilities (MGLD) as well as a number of other high incidence disabilities. All primary schools now have additional teaching support in place for this purpose. Schools can decide how best to use this allocation based on the needs of the pupils. Most pupils with a MGLD are included in ordinary classes with their peers and are supported by their class teacher. This might be done with a teacher working with a group of pupils or on a one to one basis for a few hours each week. The curriculum is flexible so that teachers can cater for the needs of children of different abilities.

X 4. The number of MGLD special classes has decreased over the years and schools have integrated the children into age-appropriate mainstream classes. Some 3,000 schools that do not have special classes for pupils with mild general learning disability meet the needs of these children through mainstream classes and the use of their General Allocation teaching resources.

5. It is important to note that 80 of the 119 schools have reduced class sizes either under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools) or other previous disadvantaged schemes. 17 of these schools will now be due an additional post when the pupils in question are divided among mainstream classes. Essentially, the loss of the teaching post from the mild class will be offset by the additional post required to maintain the lower class sizes because of their disadvantaged categorisation

6. Following the notification to schools to discontinue the classes, the Minister subsequently indicated that proposals from schools requesting the retention of the special class would be considered where they demonstrate that it is educationally more beneficial for the pupils involved to be in a special class of their own rather than to be integrated with their peers and supported by the mainstream classroom teacher and the learning resource teacher.

Proposals were received from 49 schools in this regard. The Department has considered these proposals and has determined that 14 classes will be retained in 16 schools. The original decision to discontinue MGLD classes remains in the other cases. Letters advising schools of the determination in each case have issued to all schools.

7. It was noted in material submitted by the schools in support of their proposals that there are situations where a number of children enrolled in the MGLD classes fall within the low incidence disability category. In these cases, schools have been advised to liaise with their local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) in the context of their eligibility for resource teaching support.

8. Future policy in this area will be informed by the outcome of the Review of Special Schools and Special Classes currently being carried out by the National Council for Special Education.

One of the key tasks of the review is to review the role of special classes in mainstream schools for pupils with special educational needs with particular regard to the principle of inclusive education as described in Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, Act 2004.

It is expected that this review will be completed in 2009.

ENDS