‘TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE’

A RIGHTS BASED REVIEW OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PROVISION IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

March 2020
What is this report and who is it for?

This is an Easy Read summary report of the NICCY report, ‘Too Little, Too Late’, which reviews the availability of special educational needs support in mainstream schools.

This report may be useful if:
- you are a parent
- you have a learning disability
- you have a child who has special educational needs.

This report can help you to understand:
- some of the issues with special educational needs support in mainstream schools as of March 2020
- what NICCY says needs to happen to make sure every child with special educational needs in NI has the best possible education.

If you would like to read the full report, it is available from NICCY’s website at https://www.niccy.org/senreviewreports.

You can also contact NICCY to:
- ask for a copy of the full report
- ask any questions you might have after reading this summary
- speak about any concerns you have about your experiences of SEN support
- find out more about the work we do to protect the rights of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

All of our contact information is included at the end of this report.
About this report

This report is by NICCY. NICCY is the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

It is our job to make sure all children and young people’s rights are protected. This includes the right to education.

All children have a right to education. A child’s background, gender, race or disability does not mean they should be treated unfairly in their right to education.

Education is very important. When we talk about education in this report, we mean learning at primary school and secondary school. All children should receive an education that helps them to develop their skills and talents to the full.

We know that some children need extra support to learn things at school, like support with reading and writing.

This is called having Special Educational Needs, or SEN. We call the extra support some children need to learn SEN support. There are lots of different types of SEN support.

There’s nothing wrong with needing SEN support. Everybody needs some support sometimes, and every child has their own strengths and challenges.

What is wrong is that we found out not every child and their family is getting the SEN support they need. This means some children are not able to learn properly and do they best they can in school.

This needs to change.
Why SEN support is important and why we did this work

Some children go to special schools where all of the children in the school have SEN and all of the children receive SEN support.

Most children go to mainstream schools. This means some children in the school need SEN support but many of them do not.

We already knew that some children and their families have had problems when trying to access SEN support in mainstream schools. We wanted to find out more about this.

We wanted to know if children’s educational needs are being met, about the barriers for children who are not getting the right SEN support, and what this means for children and their families.

We need to know if the education system can make sure all children who need SEN support will receive it now and in the future.

When we talk about the education system, we mean the different organisations and agencies who provide support for children with SEN. This includes some health and wellbeing organisations and services.

We need the organisations and agencies in the education system who look after and make decisions about education to make changes to help all children who need SEN support to get the right support at the right time.

We want to be sure that these organisations are working well together to help children with SEN do their best at school.
This report will tell you:

- Why SEN support is important
- Why we did this work
- What we found out about SEN support
- What actions need to happen now.

What we did

We listened to lots of people who are involved in education and wanted to share their experiences.

This included

- parents and carers
- school principals
- special educational needs coordinators
- educational psychologists
- charities and community organisations who help children and families.

We also looked at information that is collected about SEN. This information came from organisations involved in the education system like the Education Authority and Department of Education.

This information included things like the different types of SEN supports that are available and how long children are waiting to have their SEN assessed.

We could not find all of the information we needed.

This is because the information might not have been properly collected, shared or stored.
What we found out about SEN support

There are more children than ever before who need SEN support.

Around 1 in 5 children need some type of SEN support.

There is a law in Northern Ireland called the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Act 2016. This law was written in 2016 but there are no guidelines for it yet.

Guidelines are like a checklist that tell us what to do. Guidelines are needed so everyone involved in education knows what they need to do to make sure this law is followed and all special educational needs are met.

We know that the Education Authority and the Department of Education are already trying to make things better.

We are working with them and other organisations to make things better by sharing what we found out and telling them what actions need to happen now.

We asked questions to find out:

If the right services are available for SEN support. We call this availability.

How easy it is for children to access SEN support, and if some children are treated differently because of where they live or other important information about them. We call this accessibility.

If SEN support is suitable for children and puts a child’s needs first when people involved in education are making decisions. We call this acceptability.
If it is easy to put SEN support in place for children who need it. We call this **adaptability**.

If children and their families think the SEN support they receive is the right support. We call this **quality and impact**.

If children are listened to when decisions are being made about their SEN support. We call this **participation**.

If organisations and people work well together to provide SEN support. We call this **cooperation**.

Most parents and carers of children with SEN told us they do not think things are good enough in any of these areas of SEN support.

When SEN support is not good enough, children fall behind in school. This can cause problems in other parts of children and their families’ lives, like making them feel left out, sad, or worried.

One of the biggest problems is not finding out if children have SEN as early as possible. Some children are waiting for years to get their needs assessed and to get extra supports in school.

When it takes too long for children to find out if they need SEN support, changes are not put in place as early as possible to help children get the best education.

This is not good enough and things need to change.

The rest of this report will tell you what is wrong with the way things currently are and what needs to change to make things better.
Are children’s SEN needs understood and assessed on time?

We found out there are problems about how many children can be assessed for SEN. We do not know how many children have been affected by this.

We do know that some children who have the most needs get assessed first. Other children have to wait for too long.

Some parents have paid private organisations for assessments because they felt they could not wait any longer to find out if their child has SEN.

What needs to happen?

Assessments should be on time and available for every child who needs them.

No parent should have to pay for their child to have a SEN assessment.

More money and resources are needed for organisations involved in the education system to make sure all SEN needs are understood and assessed as early as possible.
Is there enough SEN support in schools for every child?

We found out that schools are under a lot of pressure. They do not always have enough money, time, or resources in place to meet the needs of all children with SEN.

Teachers and other school staff do not always have enough training to understand and support children with SEN.

This means they are not always able to support both learning and development needs, including support for emotions and behaviour.

When teachers and other school staff can’t support children with their emotions and behaviour it can lead to some children being left out of activities or being sent home from school.

What needs to happen?

Teachers and other school staff need more training to be able to support all children in the best possible way with both learning and development.

More money and resources are needed for schools to meet the needs of all children with SEN.

Teachers need more opportunities to speak to each other about what works well and to help children moving between primary school and secondary school.
Are there enough support services and are they high quality?

All the different groups of people we spoke to about SEN told us they think there is not enough SEN support and SEN support is not always high quality. They also said there are barriers for children accessing SEN assessment and support, including long waiting times.

Sometimes there is more support available if you live in a certain area. This is not fair as everyone should be able to access all support.

Some children receive SEN support but it is not the right type of support for their needs or the support doesn’t last long enough to make a positive difference to their education.

Are there problems with the statementing and assessment process?

If the supports provided in school are not meeting a child’s needs, they can get a **statutory assessment**.

This is a formal and detailed process to find out what type of SEN a child has and what type of additional SEN support is needed.

After this assessment, some children will get a **statement** of SEN.

This **statement** is a legal document which describes the child’s needs and what educational support they need.

Children should have assessment and statementing within 6 months, but we found out that almost every child is waiting longer than this.
When waiting times are longer than they should be, schools find it difficult to put the right SEN support in place.

Parents have also told us that statements can be hard to understand and they do not always include all of the important information about what type of SEN support is needed.

School principals and Educational Psychologists have told us that because of the way things are currently done, staff might have to put some SEN supports in place even if they do not think they are the best SEN supports to help a child.

This is a waste of time and resources and means some children have to wait even longer to get the right support.

What needs to happen?

More money and resources are needed to stop long waiting times.

SEN support needs to be fair and available for everybody. Things like where you live or what types of needs you have should not make a difference about whether or not you can receive high quality services and supports.

The education system needs to think about what works best for the child and not just what works best for the organisations.

Information needs to be collected, shared and stored properly to make sure the right decisions are being made.
Is it easy to understand and keep track of what is happening with a child’s SEN support?

All of the groups of people we spoke to told us that it can be hard to understand the education system when it comes to SEN support.

This includes:
- being given confusing information
- people not sharing the right information at the right time
- people who make decisions without listening to recommendations from others
- people not explaining why decisions were made
- people not being able to answer questions about SEN support.

We found out that parents and carers are not getting enough information that is easy for them to understand.

Most parents and carers do not know who they can speak to about their child’s SEN and feel like there is no one there to support them.

What needs to happen?

There needs to be more money and resources for people working in SEN to help them provide clear and up to date information.

The education system needs to take more responsibility for collecting, sharing and storing the right information to help everyone involved in SEN including the different organisations, schools, and children and their families.
Does everyone work well together to provide SEN support?

We found out that children are not always involved in the SEN process. This means they are not being listened to when decisions are being made about them.

Parents and carers also felt that their voices were not being heard by some of the other people involved in the SEN process.

They feel like other people did not want to help them. This has a bad effect on other parts of children and their families’ lives, like their mental health and wellbeing.

This is wrong because children and their families should have choice and control in the process.

We also found out that the different people and organisations do not always share the right information at the right time or work well together as quickly as possible to make good changes to help children.

What needs to happen?

Organisations need to work better together and make sure everyone is involved in the right way.

The education system needs to have a better process put in place for SEN for organisations to be able to do this.

This will help everyone to understand what their responsibilities are and how they can work better together, including what type of information they need to share and when.

This will make it easier to understand how and why decisions are made.
What next?

This report has told you why high quality SEN support, provided as early as possible, is important, about some of the problems with the way things currently are, and what actions should be taken to fix these problems.

Remember, you can read the full list of our recommendations in our main report on our website.

We will keep records about what changes are made to try to make things better and whether or not they make a difference for children and their families.

We will write more reports when we have more information about this.

NICCY will always continue to protect all rights of all children in Northern Ireland.

You can find out more about children’s rights and keep up to date with our work on our website or by getting in touch with the contact information on the next page.
Find out more

We have written a longer report about SEN support and have lots of other information and resources available.

You can find out more about this and other work we do by

Calling us on **028 9031 1616**

Sending an email to **info@niccy.org**

Sending us a letter to **NICCY**
**Equality House**
**7-9 Shaftesbury Square**
**Belfast**
**BT2 7DP**

Sending us a message on Facebook @nichildrenscommissioner
Twitter @nichildcom

Visiting our website at **www.niccy.org**
Front cover image:

The artwork presented on the cover was captured from a child at a celebration event on the 20th November 2019 to mark the 30th Anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

It represents what children’s rights mean to them, including the importance of an effective education and the right to be treated equally.

This report was published in March 2020. Check our website for the most up to date information: www.niccy.org