

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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24 February 2026

Dear Principal

As Education Minister I have continually reiterated my commitment to ensuring that all children with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) have a school placement that is appropriate to meet their needs. This is a policy imperative for my department and the Education Authority (EA). SEN placements are provided in three ways; within Special Schools, within mainstream classes in mainstream schools and within special provision in mainstream schools.

The need for all types of SEN provision has grown exponentially in recent years and is projected to continue to rise, even with a predicted decline in the overall school age population. All schools have a role to play in meeting the needs of this changing demographic.

Over 6,000 additional special education places have been created between 2020-2025. In 2025 alone, a total of 1,374 additional special education places were created via 29 new classes in special schools and 128 specialist provision classes in mainstream schools. This expansion has largely been achieved through the voluntary introduction of specialist provisions by a minority of schools (26%). To meet future demand and ensure that children do not have to travel unacceptably long distances to access appropriate placements, I am now requiring all mainstream schools which the EA considers suitable to facilitate specialist provision to engage constructively with them to put it in place. The policy objective is to ensure children and young people with a statement of SEN have access to an appropriate specialist placement in their local community, where possible, and educated alongside their friends and peers.

EA's [Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools](#) articulates the existing policy in this area. It provides the rationale for specialist provision, the guiding principles which inform the engagement process with schools, the criteria used to assess suitability, the process involved in setting up a provision and the legislative context. I have asked that this document be updated urgently to reflect my requirement that all mainstream schools considered by EA to be suitable to facilitate specialist provision engage constructively with them to ensure a solution is implemented.

I would like to pay tribute to those schools which have already moved to set up specialist provision. I had hoped that more would have done so. For the reasons outlined above, and to ensure a more equitable distribution of the associated workload (as recommended in the recent Independent Review of Workload) adopting a more direct approach is now considered necessary. The feedback I have received from those schools which have already set up specialist provision has been overwhelmingly positive, however, I accept that schools need to be adequately supported through this process. To that end, the EA has developed an enhanced package of assistance, full details of which are available [here](#). I want to be very clear that the purpose of my revised position is not to seek to transfer responsibility for this issue to schools, but rather to ensure the system as a whole comes together in a more collegiate and effective way to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children in our society. The enhanced EA support package is further evidence of our commitment to that shared endeavour.

Meeting the needs of children and young people with SEN is one of the most pressing challenges facing educational systems across many countries. I am determined that we in Northern Ireland will rise to the challenge collectively. Schools, EA, my Department and the Executive as a whole all have a vital role to play.

The EA will shortly be approaching a number of schools in areas where gaps in provision for 2026 are most acute. I want to thank you in advance for engaging constructively with EA to ensure that all children in your local community receive a school place which meets their needs. I can assure you that EA officers will do all they can to support you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Givan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education

Copy:

Principals and Boards of Governors

EA

CCMS

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

NICIE

Governing Bodies Association

CCEA

GTCNI

Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

Controlled Schools' Support Council
TRC
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NICCY