



Whole School Guidance in Special Schools



NPC

SUPPORTING PARENTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

NPC Vision

The National Parents Council want to see an Ireland where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

NPC Mission

The National Parents Council exists to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children’s education. NPC will work to increase the capacity and capability of the education sector, to achieve true partnership and deliver better outcomes for all children and young people.

Values

NPC knows that when parents and schools work together, children do better. Therefore, NPC believes that in order to achieve this parents must feel:

Engaged: Parents must be actively engaged in the education of their children.

Valued: Parents should be viewed as full partners in the decisions that affect their children and their family.

Supported: Parents’ involvement in children’s education must be supported by the attitudes, beliefs and practices of all members of the school and broader education community.

Welcomed: Parents should be welcome in the school, and their support and assistance sought as a valuable resource to support children’s education in the school.

Partners: Parents must be viewed as partners in facilitating children’s learning and be supported in this role by the school and broader education community.

Connected: All communication and dialogue with parents must be regular, open, two-way and meaningful.

National Parents Council

Key Activities

SERVICE DELIVERY

NPC's services are developed to empower parents so that they can support their children in all aspects of education.

HELPLINE

The NPC helpline is a national confidential service for parents. The helpline staff listen and give information and support to parents to help them make the best possible decisions for and with their children.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The NPC Training and Development programme is a national programme of training, development and support for parents. The purpose is to empower parents to play an active part in their child's education at every level.

WEBSITE

The NPC's website www.npc.ie aims to provide parents with information regarding education at early years, primary and post primary levels.

ADVOCACY

NPC engages in awareness-raising activities and campaigning and lobbying at a national level on the objectives of its Strategic Plan.

REPRESENTING PARENTS

NPC represents the voice of parents through representation on external bodies and other mediums. NPC consults with parents and brings parents' views to bear on education policy.

BUILDING PARTICIPATION

NPC builds participation strategies and activities to ensure parents and children are an integral part of the work of NPC.



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Introduction

The National Parents Council (NPC) are pleased to provide observations and feedback on the working draft *Whole-School Guidance in special schools: Guidelines*.

In preparation for this submission, the NPC conducted a survey to gather parents' opinions. The survey explored parents' views on the types of guidance and support children and young people need, the areas that should be prioritised, how information about guidance and support should be shared with families, and the allocation of support according to individual needs.

The survey also provided parents with an opportunity to share additional comments and experiences in relation to guidance in special schools. The findings from the survey, together with the NPC's organisational experience and engagement with parents, have informed the comments and recommendations presented in this report.



General Comments

NPC welcomes the development of Guidelines for Whole-School Guidance in Special Schools. We recognise the value of establishing a clear and coordinated approach to guidance that reflects the needs and experiences of children and young people in special schools.

NPC welcomes the person-centred, holistic and inclusive approach to Whole-School Guidance. The recognition that guidance should respond to the individual strengths, interests, communication needs, preferences and aspirations of each student is particularly important, we believe, in the special-school context.

NPC welcomes the whole-school approach to guidance and the recognition that responsibility for guidance is shared across the school community. We welcome the emphasis on guidance being woven through students' school experiences, rather than being dependent on one staff member or a single intervention at a particular stage of the student's school journey.

However, NPC is concerned that the draft guidelines do not provide for a separate staffing allocation for Whole-School Guidance in special schools. The guidelines state that schools should incorporate WSG within existing resources. Given that mainstream post-primary schools are allocated dedicated guidance teachers, we are concerned that special schools that have students up to 18 years of age are not treated in the same way.

NPC welcomes the inclusion of case studies and practical examples throughout the guidelines. We believe these examples provide useful practical support to schools and help to demonstrate how Whole-School Guidance can be applied in real-life situations. They also help illustrate how a person-centred approach can support students and families in planning for future pathways and transitions.

Survey

A survey titled “Whole-School Guidance in Special Schools” was sent to the NPC database of parents who had consented to receiving such invitations. It was open between the 28th of August and the 7th of September 2026 and during this time, a total of 130 responses were received.

The survey asked a range of questions to understand parents’ views on the areas that should be prioritised, how information about guidance and support should be shared with families, and the allocation of support according to individual needs.

It included a mix of ranking, multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing parents to indicate their priorities and provide more detailed comments based on their experiences and views. The main findings of the survey, including key themes and parents’ views, are presented throughout this report.

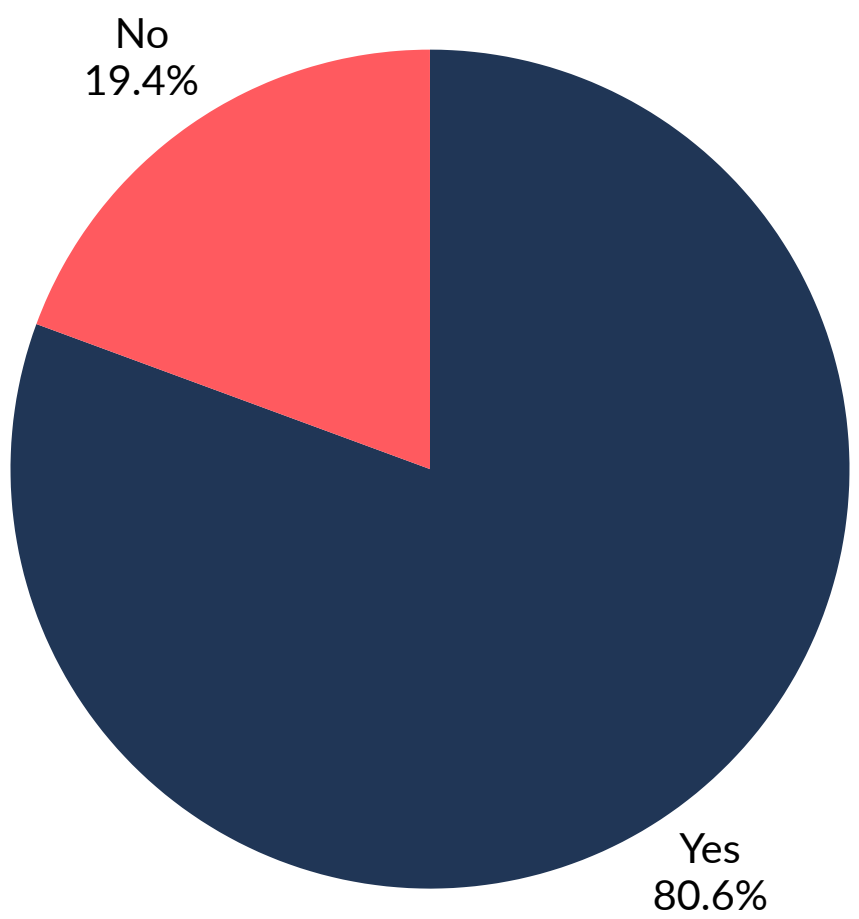


Survey Findings

Parents were first asked whether their child currently attends a special school.

Of the 130 respondents, 25 parents (19.4%) reported that their child attends a special school. The majority of respondents, 104 parents (80.6%), reported that their child does not attend a special school, while one respondent did not provide a response to this question (see Figure 1).

The responses have been considered separately throughout the report, allowing the views of parents of children attending special schools to be presented alongside the views of parents whose children do not attend special schools.



(Figure 1)
Does your child attend a special school?

Parents’ ranking of areas of guidance

Among parents whose child attends a special school, life skills and independence was ranked as the most important area of guidance. This was followed by wellbeing and emotional development, communication, choice and decision-making, and friendships and relationships.

The next highest-ranked areas were preparing for life after school, education, training and future opportunities, travel and community participation, understanding rights and staying safe, and money and financial skills.

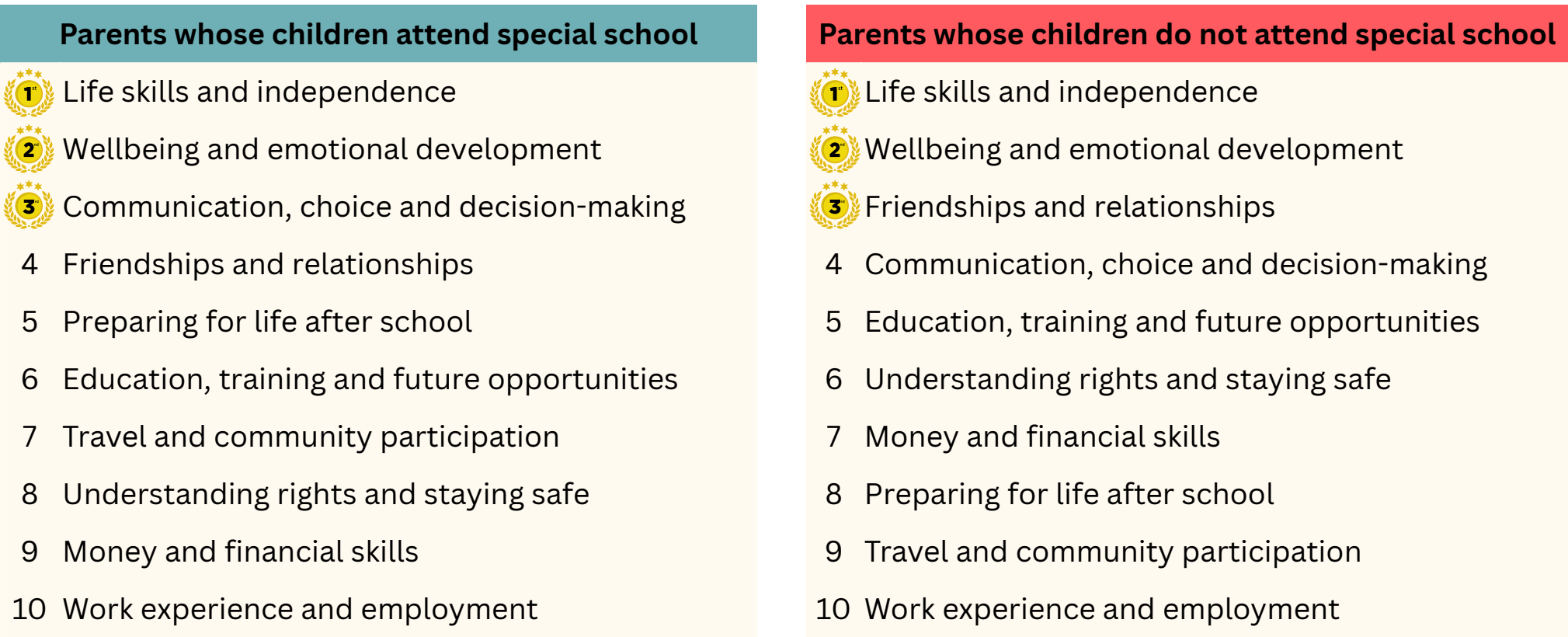
Work experience and employment was ranked lowest overall.

Among parents whose child does not attend a special school, life skills and independence was also ranked as the most important area of guidance. This was followed by wellbeing and emotional development, friendships and relationships, and communication, choice and decision-making.

The next highest-ranked areas were education, training and future opportunities, understanding rights and staying safe, money and financial skills, preparing for life after school, and travel and community participation.

Work experience and employment was ranked lowest overall.

The findings show a strong consistency across both groups, with life skills and independence, wellbeing, communication and decision-making, and relationships emerging as the highest priorities (see Figure 2).



(Figure 2)
Please rank the following areas in order of importance for your child, from most important to least important.

Parents were also asked whether there were any other areas of guidance or support that they felt should be included.

Parents of children attending special schools identified a number of additional areas of guidance and support. These included safeguarding and personal safety, physical education and sport, literacy and educational achievement, and information about services and resources available after school.

Parents also highlighted the importance of ensuring that children and young people with significant physical, communication or support needs have appropriate information about their options and supports after leaving school.

Some parents also raised the need for additional specialist supports and staffing within special schools.

Parents whose children do not attend special schools identified a wide range of additional areas, including mental health and emotional wellbeing, health and personal care, online safety, social media awareness, critical thinking, self-acceptance, resilience, IT skills and positive relationships.

Some parents emphasised the importance of guidance on further education, apprenticeships, the Leaving Certificate and entering the world of work.

A number of parents also highlighted the importance of student voice and ensuring that children and young people are supported to understand and navigate the choices available to them.

*This is a summary of the parents' voices; please refer to the appendix for full answers.

Parents' preferred methods of receiving information

Parents were asked to rank a range of methods for receiving information about guidance and support, from most useful to least useful.

Among parents whose child attends a special school, information sent directly to parents was the most preferred method. This was followed by meetings with school staff, school newsletters or email updates, and parent information evenings or workshops.

The next preferred methods were text messages or a parent communication app, information at parent-teacher or review meetings, and the school website.

Information provided directly to students in school was ranked next, followed by social media and visual or poster information around the school, which were ranked lowest.

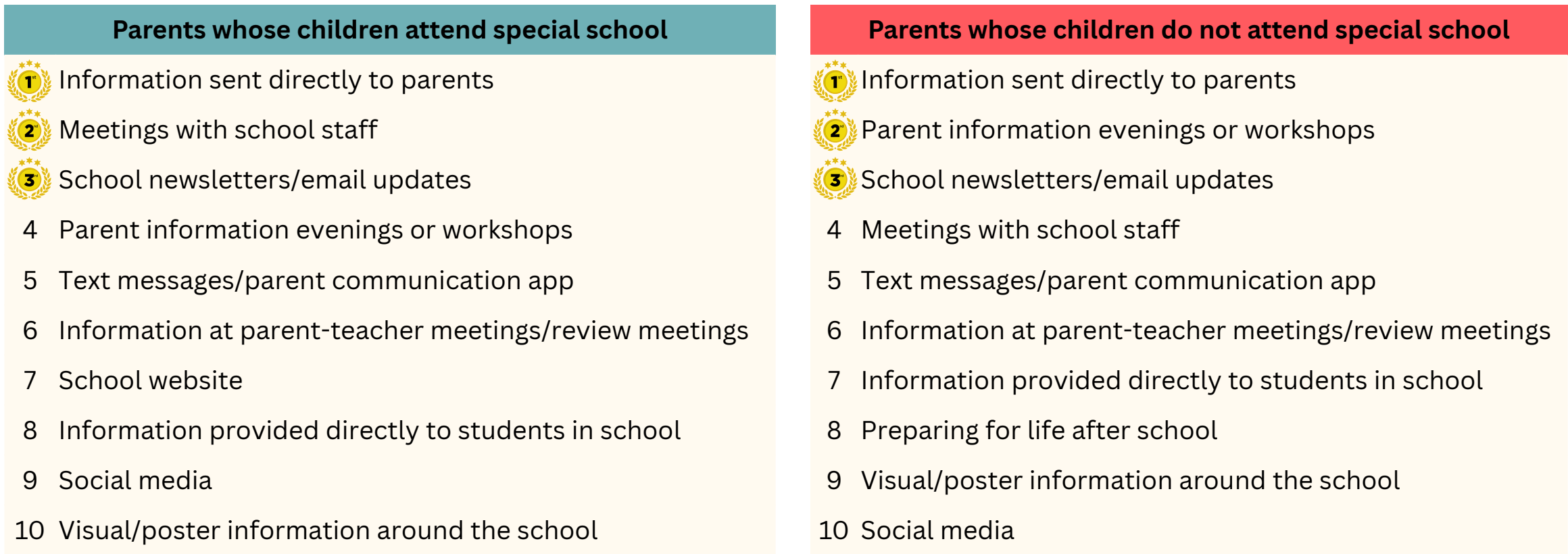
Among parents whose child does not attend a special school, information sent directly to parents was also the most preferred method.

This was followed by parent information evenings or workshops, school newsletters or email updates, and meetings with school staff.

The next preferred methods were text messages or a parent communication app, the school website, and information at parent-teacher or review meetings.

Information provided directly to students in school and visual or poster information were ranked lower, while social media was the least preferred method.

The findings from both groups show a clear preference for direct communication with parents, supported by opportunities for meetings, information evenings and regular written or digital updates (see Figure 3).



(Figure 3)
How would you prefer to receive information about guidance and support available to your child?

Parents were given an opportunity to provide additional suggestions on how schools could make information about guidance and support easier to find and understand.

Parents of children attending special schools highlighted the importance of providing information about post-school services and pathways well in advance.

Suggestions included bringing the HSE and adult services into schools to meet parents and students and inviting future service providers to provide information evenings.

Parents whose children do not attend special schools suggested a range of approaches, including sending information home in school bags, providing physical leaflets and making information available online.

Parents also suggested coffee mornings, network groups, support groups, information evenings and workshops.

A number of parents highlighted the value of hearing directly from other families and former students about their experiences of transition. Some suggested that schools could invite former students and families to share their experiences with those preparing for transition.

Parents also emphasised the importance of regular communication throughout the year, timely communication when arrangements change, and providing information in a variety of languages and accessible formats.

*This is a summary of the parents' voices; please refer to the appendix for full answers.

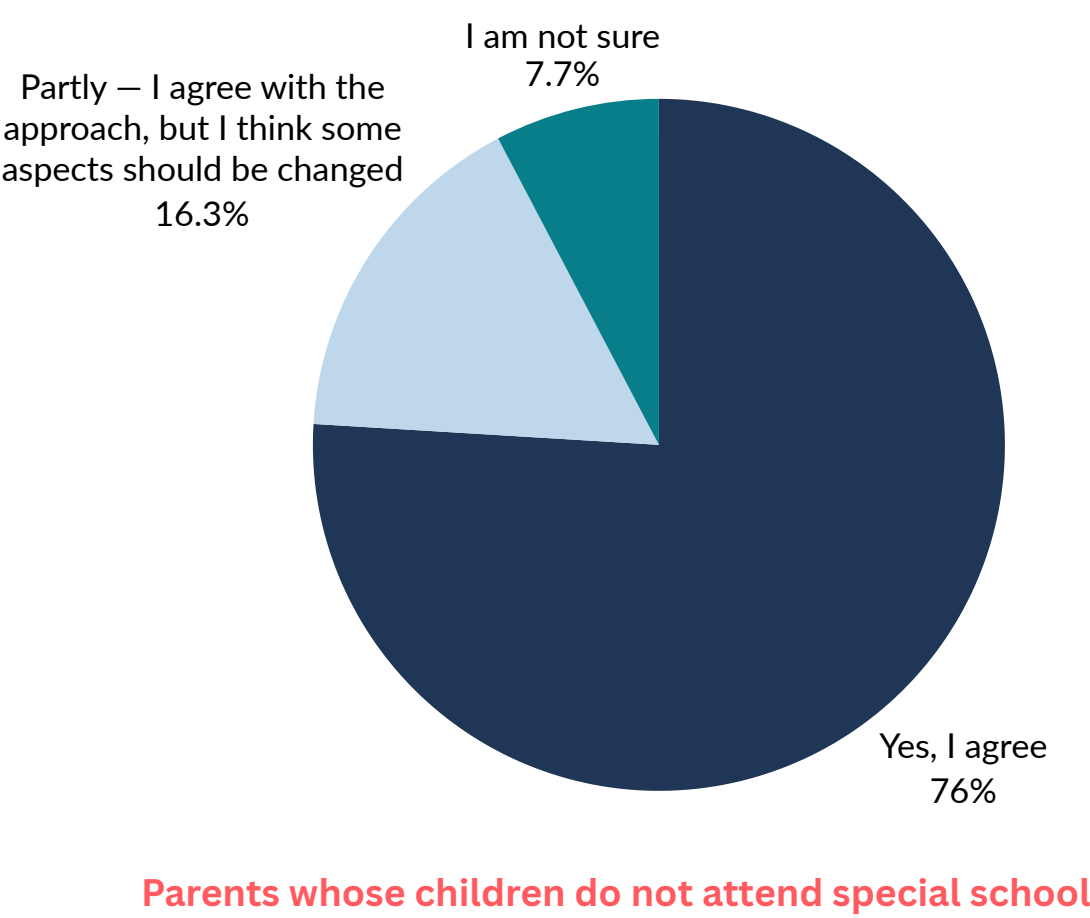
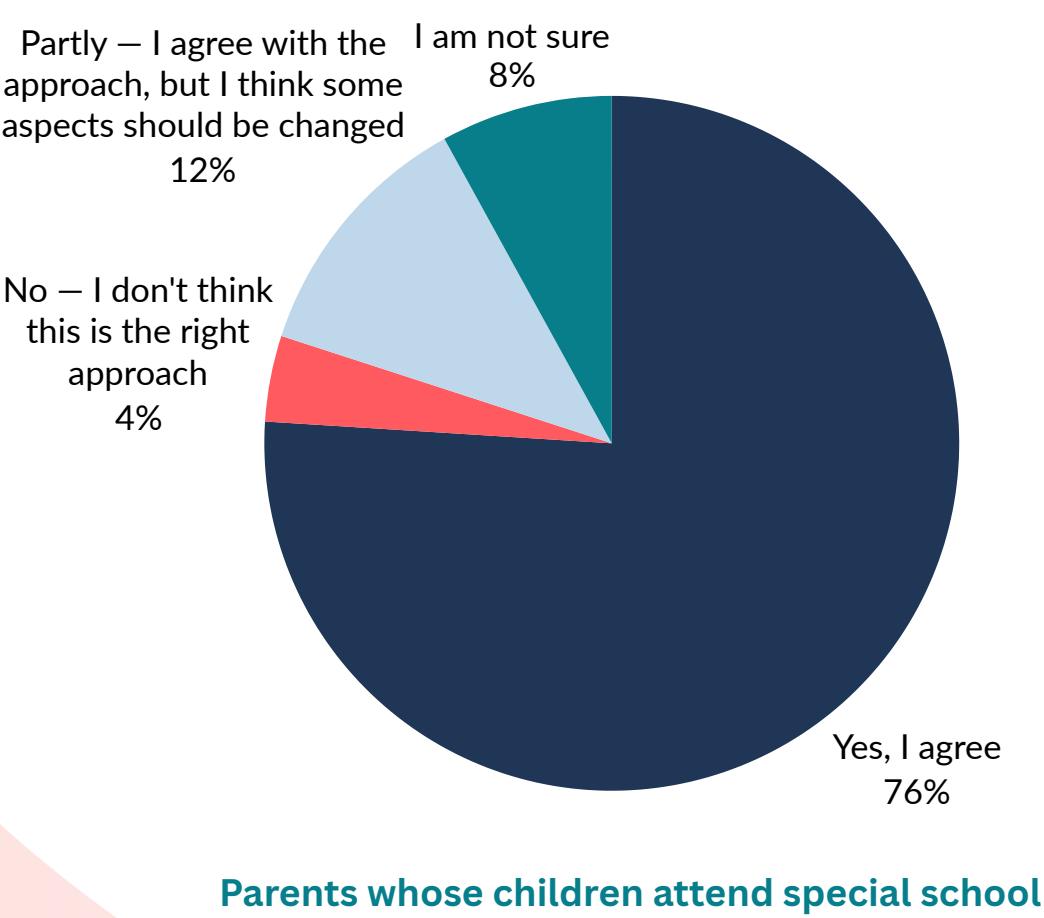
Parents’ views on providing different levels of guidance according to individual needs

Parents were asked whether they agreed with an approach where different levels of guidance are provided according to each student’s individual needs.

Among parents whose child attends a special school, 19 parents (76%) agreed with this approach. A further 3 parents (12%) partly agreed, indicating that some aspects should be changed, while 2 parents (8%) were unsure. One parent (4%) did not agree with the approach.

Among parents whose child does not attend a special school, 79 parents (76%) agreed with this approach. A further 17 parents (16.3%) partly agreed, while 8 parents (7.7%) were unsure.

The findings demonstrate a strong level of support in both groups for providing different levels of guidance according to individual need (see Figure 4).



(Figure 4)
Do you agree with this approach of providing different levels of guidance according to each student's individual needs?

Participants were asked to explain their response to the previous question.

Parents of children attending special schools strongly emphasised that each child has different needs and therefore requires an individualised approach.

Some parents raised specific concerns about staffing and specialist supports, including what they described as the need for continuity of SNA support and access to appropriate health and therapeutic expertise.

Parents whose children do not attend special schools similarly emphasised that one size does not fit all.

Some parents raised concerns about how decisions would be made about which students receive additional or intensive support. Questions were raised about the criteria and thresholds for accessing higher levels of support and whether resources would be sufficient to meet demand.

A number of parents also highlighted the importance of ensuring that students who may not outwardly appear to need support are not overlooked and that students should be able to access additional guidance as their needs change.

*This is a summary of the parents' voices; please refer to the appendix for full answers.

Additional comments

Respondents were given a final opportunity to provide any additional comments.

Parents of children attending special schools highlighted the need for additional support and resources for special schools.

Some parents raised concerns about communication between schools, families and relevant services. Others highlighted the need for improved access to specialist supports, including speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

Parents also highlighted the importance of listening to students and ensuring that guidance and support are child-centred and based on individual needs.

Parents whose children do not attend special schools also highlighted the importance of an individualised and child-centred approach.

Some parents called for greater opportunities for students to be listened to and involved in decisions affecting them. Others highlighted the importance of equality of opportunity for children and young people attending special schools.

Additional comments included the need for greater information about post-school opportunities, improved access to appropriate supports, and stronger communication between parents, schools and the Department of Education.

Overall, the additional comments reinforced the importance of individualised support, effective communication, early planning, appropriate resources and meaningful opportunities for children and young people to participate in decisions about their future.

*This is a summary of the parents' voices; please refer to the appendix for full answers.



Conclusion

Overall, the NPC welcomes the development of Guidelines for Whole-School Guidance in Special Schools and recognises the opportunity to strengthen and further develop guidance provision for children and young people. The survey findings demonstrate the importance parents place on a person-centred, individualised and holistic approach, with particular emphasis on independence, wellbeing, communication, decision-making, relationships and preparation for life beyond school.

NPC recommends that the final guidelines are supported by the appropriate staffing, resources, training and structures necessary for effective implementation. It is important that Whole-School Guidance is not only clearly outlined in guidance, but is supported in practice so that every child and young person can access appropriate guidance and support throughout their school journey and as they prepare for their next stage of life.

Appendix

Are there any other areas of guidance or support that you think should be included?

1. Safeguarding and ways to say you're being abused are very important
2. Asking the children in attendance what they want
3. Integration in every day life, etiquette in restaurants, shops,
4. physically education/ sports
5. Guidance for Parents/Guardians. As a mother of a child and sister with a disability who went to a special school there was very little guidance supports given to parents/guardians on options for post school education particularly in the area of moving into Education and Training that happen in the remedial setting. While I acknowledge young people should be at the centre of decision making it is unrealistic for some young people with special needs to be solely in charge of this decision. Having experienced the transition from a special school to after school education and training I felt extremely disempowered and misinformed which meant my sister was not best supported in her assisted decision making. This process was very much controlled by the school and in the end disempowered us as a family to support my sibling.
6. Transparency when families and schools have concerns and the lines of communications and interactions shared after meeting and agreed like the minutes of committees
7. This should be the same for students in autism homeroom in a mainstream school
8. Give CDNT enough resources to support children in special ed
9. No others come to mind
10. Basic life skills how to look after yourself especially mental health..
11. Dyslexia
12. Sport and exercise
13. Helping management deal positively and respectfully with our children.
14. Physical Education swimming , hydrotherapy, inclusive school teams for football etc
15. Neurodivergent adaptation
16. Lots of guidance re leaving certificate and college courses
17. Information about services/resources available after school
18. Dealing with AI
19. Critical thinking and understanding sources of information and social media awareness
20. No
21. No mention of literacy or educational achievement in no 2 why not? Need to raise the bar in our special schools. Whole school Guidance is a whole school endeavour!
22. I think some of the areas above are important but the guidance should come from home

23. Mental health of pupils and carers around them, more resting therapies when tired, special benefit for each person
24. Self acceptance
25. Taylored learning
26. No
27. Online protection skills
28. compassionate communication and reflection and it what way this is helpful in society
29. Health and personal care, online safety, emotional wellbeing, and support for families and carers.”
30. Entrepreneurship Healing the Planet,
31. Dealing with socialmedia
32. IT skills
33. Yes reality about the world of work. Imaportance of third level education / appreticeships for maturity and growth. Learning the importance of hobbies ,heath and fitness-wellbeing in the arts etchow to fill
34. Mental health and the role of hormones in everyone's life
35. Psychological safety has to underpin everything. If the child does not feel safe or able to trust the environment, everything else is immaterial. It is the foundation of everything else.
36. Virtual/online challenges
37. Positive relationships
38. Na
39. Critical thinking means be able to stand up even if 90% dont agree.
40. resilience building skills
41. Educational attainment my daughter is in a reading school for dyslexia
42. For children with significant physical and communication disabilities, who cannot live independently, parents need to understand options and supports available after school.
43. Ongoing support systems. Maybe hubs around the country with information on services available, including support to access those services.
44. More sna support
45. Consent. AI. Cyber bullying. Self esteem

Is there anything else the school could do to make information about guidance and support easier for you to find and understand?

1. Post it or pop it in to the child's bag; leave at the reception hatch for parents to pick up when doing drop offs and collections, and let them know it's there!
2. Coffee mornings / network groups / support groups
3. Physical leaflet sent home in school bags
4. Yes information and guidance should be a combination of role modeling/peer to peer talks (bringing past students in to provide experiences of transition to peers). I think this should also happen in the family-family space where families including the young people provide talks on their experiences to families about to make the transitions during information evenings
5. No
6. Meetings with parents during the year, not only the child
7. Take parents input into consideration for all changes that might happen as they know their children best
8. Bring in the HSE and adult services in to meet parents and students
9. Information evenings
10. Text messages
11. Know more about it themselves
12. Don't know
13. Invite future service providers to give information evening in the school
14. No
15. No
16. Need to explain the pathways after school and how to prepare for these well in advance not just as the child is preparing to leave. Need to have goals for the child so that they can reach their full potential.
17. Appointment of special counsel
18. I find personal 1 to 1 meeting the most helpful whenever it is possible.
19. Not enough time allocated to parents-teacher meetings
20. No
21. Clear guidelines sent to parents especially around children with additional needs and what the school has to offer them
22. workshops with and/or without students
23. Have it in a variety of languages
24. yes more time given to guidance as some are in the classroom due to varying interpretation of circulars
25. Send it in the emails or upload directly to cladding and have it as a section to store these files/documents
26. Should be available and signposted on demand. communication should be sent regularly throughout the year and changes should also be communicated in a timely manner.
27. Yes, provide any guidance or information about my child's future education options
28. Know your students and parents positive relationships
29. Na

30. put on school attendance app aladdin
31. An information pack specifically for each family. Hardcopy. So much information is digital it's easy to forget where to look. Physical copies are a lot easier and help people remember all available supports and information. As info changes new info can be sent out to parents

Please tell us why you chose your answer:

1. Every pupils needs is individual therefore their support should be individualised
2. My daughter would be part of the few.
3. A one size fits all cannot work. This approach recognises the different abilities of students.
4. I do agree a staggered approach- however so many parents are in denial ,some are scamming the system for extra payments; how do you know which to give what to?
5. Differentiating for the individual needs
6. I'm not sure I understand exactly what this means
7. I think guidance should be instrumental to all staff. I know this is the idea of whole school at present but in my professional role this is not a reality on the ground. I think a certain level of guidance training should be included within all initial teacher education, cpd and sna training. Young people can be very selective as to where they seek guidance for this reason plus guidance teacher shortages I think guidance for all should entail a certain level of knowledge from all staff
8. My child when in school was not given the right support directed by the principal to the guidance councillor unfortunately
9. Again, parental involvement is necessary
10. Students with additional needs are very much individuals first and foremost and so their individual needs should be catered for
11. Some students need different support
12. I think my son would need additional support
13. Most if not all students need intensive support
14. Each child has different support needs
15. A tailor made individual wrap around approach is what's needed
16. Everyone is different and some might need the information broken down so to be able to understand it better
17. Each child requires a different level of support, the more individual support to meet the kids needs the better but I'm sure that will depend on budgets etc.
18. Every child's needs in a special school are different and should have access to the staff required based on their needs
19. Each child's individual circumstances and disability is different, some need a lot of support communicating and regulating whereas others do not need as much help
20. To ensure that all children's needs are met but to also have bandwidth to provide additional support in certain topics as needed based on the child themselves

21. Peg feeding needs to be addressed re education given by peg nurses in hospitals out in schools and not left to parents only. Continuity of Sna for the same child each year instead of constantly walking each new year. Nurses in mild intelloschools aswell as care needs for feeding and replacement of stomas devices important.
22. It needs adjusting to help identify the students in need
23. Individualised support is best
24. Each student is so different and certain topics / guidance may or may not be needed
25. Because of the diverse range of needs within the school
26. This is the current approach and I think it is right.
27. Meeting individual needs with customised guidance level is essential because individuals are different and process information differently
28. My experience is that some teenagers need one to one engagement so they can process information fully
29. Compared to other countries (like France for eg.) this is incredibly helpful in its differentiation. I don't know the details of it well enough to critique anything!
30. Each child learns differently and develops at different stages. Knowing the child's developed stage and ability should alter each approach. M
31. I think the threshold for support is usually too high, and there are a lot of missed opportunities to make a huge difference at children's with minor level of support needs, just because they "seem fine".
32. Guidance is very specific in each case to every child's individual need
33. I agree in general
34. All children understand and learn differently
35. Guidance for All would be nice and ideal, then again, I do realise some students may need more intensive and individualised support. Combination of the two, the one doesn't exclude the other might be nice. Funds and resources should be allocated equally but I do understand that some schools need more resources than others.
36. The theoretical guidance you provide differ from practical outcomes
37. As long as the intensity of the support is correctly recognised and implemented j
38. The way support is allocated lacking information to the parents it's structure and criteria
39. There are levels of disability
40. Children's needs can vary from year to year and some may not present early that they need the extra support. Schools need more education in order to pick up on these situations and be able to deal with them supportively
41. Everyone person is different and the need for guidance will greatly differ
42. Every child is different and has different skills, in my opinion it is important to support individual and acknowledge where their skills are and where support is needed
43. I think if class sizes were reduced and classrooms were made more sensory friendly then the needs of some children could be met by the class teacher in an inclusive way

44. Each child is different and some seek external guidance more, others have inner drive. Each person is unique with different levels of need.
45. Because each child is an individual as is each family unit and background
46. Students have varying needs both emotional, educational and social and these cannot be met by just subject teachers.
47. Each child is unique, with a different culture, background and experiences. Therefore different approaches will be required for different kids. One approach does not fit all
48. Start where the learners 'at'. Build from there. Just because children are the same age we shouldn't assume they all have the same interest or have acquired the same level of skills as standard. Interests vary. Strengths vary.
49. I agree each child is unique and approaches & needs are unique. But if we stop generalising everything and make the unique the norm there is space for everybody
50. Needs vary so should approach to communication
51. I'm not sure how else you can do it. One must be careful to not make assumptions about children's needs. They may not have developed the skills to self-advocate. e.g. non-speaking autistic children may need help, guidance but may not be able to communicate that in traditional ways.
52. Children's learning and emotional needs change as they develop, the option for children to receive support as/when they need it is important
53. Hard to professionally triage needs..if support is not allocated based on diagnosis what are the criteria or eligibility for support for few it's not currently equitable
54. Na
55. Each student is unique with their own set of talents and challenges
56. Yes, as long as the resources are there. But this is Ireland and that's not the case. Someone will always get overlooked.
57. So those that need help the most get it
58. Each child's needs are different
59. All children learn differently so a tailor's approach is important
60. Not enough information how this would work
61. Some children just need an additional bit of support similar to the workplace.
62. It can be overwhelming to have every option explained to all if not applicable.
63. Being so I understand the need of more support for certain individuals
64. Who determines who needs more support and who doesn't
65. If someone needs more guidance it should be available as needed to give the individual the best support for future life
66. I believe children learn at the pace of the person in the class who finds it hardest. With that some children will be held back if they have to focus on irrelevant to them, information or supports. Likewise children who do need more guidance may be overlooked when trying to do a capture all approach.

- 67. All students are different and need individualized plans
- 68. I think that the individualised approach is best

Would you like to tell us anything else?

- 1. My child's friend attends a special school - their opportunities to develop as individuals and achieve in life should be equal
- 2. Existing Special schools need more support/resources
- 3. Communication could be vastly improved
- 4. I think a lot of focus is being put on special kids, this is to the detriment of mainstream kids, it's astounding as a parent to see this and see mainstream kids falling behind because they are not special
- 5. Radical change and improvements in our education system with regard to those in special classes is needed immediately
- 6. No
- 7. The department of education should contact parents to ask them about their experience with schools more before complaints escalate
- 8. No but please include homeroom that are for kids in mainstream schools as well in this
- 9. It's not a one size fits all, each child should have a wrap around individualised plan according to their needs
- 10. I think LCA should be available to students every year.
- 11. Students should be listened to more without judgement
- 12. How management deal with our children should be supported and supervised by NEPs, our special schools need more regular inspections from the DES to the same level as other schools
- 13. Please actually engage with parents and educators on this do not just make decisions based on political ideals. Do what's right for all children not just headline grabbing changes but actually policies and vision to make things work for the people who need it most.
- 14. Everyone different
- 15. I find there is a lack of support from department of health with the department of education. This needs to be reviewed. Also the specialised schools need physiotherapist and speech and language therapist. The OT needs updated training if been there along time with new and advanced ways of supporting children. This is more important than having them in CDNT as the therapy's can be done during school time and my daughter wouldn't have to miss out on school time
- 16. It should be easy
- 17. No
- 18. More information from the RSA for seniors students And more sex talks and transmitted diseases for seniors
- 19. No
- 20. No thank you
- 21. Thank you for the work you are doing!
- 22. No

23. Ireland is becoming a multicultural country, what is great. However, that means that non native english speakers children with additional needs would eventually attend our schools, and it could be interesting to think about how and if their inclusion should follow the same pathways of kids with Irish cultural and language background.
24. I am a Guidance Counsellor in a mainstream setting and we need to be ambitious for our students in special schools. Raise the educational bar so that they have real possibilities after school.
25. no
26. No
27. Without official assessment, very limited support is made available. Children develop, learn, progress but no follow up assessment due the not enough funding for referrals or assessors
28. No
29. No.
30. Meaningful support must be child centered not based on parental needs or teacher preferences
31. No
32. Focus on skills
33. Workshops which bring parents and teachers together in a single setting is the most helpful as parents can build a network to support each other & their children. Support in numbers.
34. At some stage I think a review of the use of the word special needs attention. While I understand there is kindness in the use of this term I think it segregates children in a negative way. While it's a small matter, I cannot offer a better solution besides maybe the term alternative ability schools.
35. More SNAs are needed