

# The Way Forward

**IMPACT**

*A School  
Psychological  
Service for **ALL**  
Children and  
Young People*



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*This document has been produced by psychologists working in the National Educational Psychological Service of the Department of Education and Skills. It's based on feedback from psychologist colleagues, all of whom are members of IMPACT, and from the various education partners.*

November 2015

# Executive summary

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has provided a quality service to schools nationally since 1999 and has been subject to the restrictions imposed by the Employment Control Framework (ECF) since late 2008/early 2009. After such a long period of restriction, the service urgently requires investment in order to expand and meet the demands of a growing school population.

That population has increased by more than 50,000 pupils in the period during which the ECF has applied. The service faces further demand through meeting its obligations to provide a service to every school in the country. The ECF has limited the ability of NEPS to provide the comprehensive school psychological service required for modern Irish society. In short, demand has significantly outgrown supply and we need to address this urgently. Investing in more staff is essential to providing a service that can meet 21st century demands.

The *Report of the Planning Group* (Department of Education & Science, 1998) envisaged a much larger NEPS staffing complement than currently exists. At present there are 173 psychologists providing a psychological service to all primary and post-primary schools. This level of staffing, sadly, demonstrates the state's failure to keep pace with the current and future expansion in student numbers.

*"We recognise the comprehensive and important work that all educational psychologists, including those in NEPS, contribute to the education system. Educational psychologists working for NEPS professionally support the learning, as well as the psychological and mental health, of all children, including those with special educational needs, in schools and classrooms."*

Division of Educational Psychology of the  
Psychological Society of Ireland



*“A NEPS psychologist assigned to a school can be an invaluable support to teachers, principals, pupils and parents. As well as psychological assessment work, NEPS psychologists can advise and help schools and teachers, give advice to parents and provide training in professional development programmes such as Incredible Years and Friends for Life... Currently, there are not enough psychologists to meet the needs of schools and pupils... The INTO... deplors the fact that it was never allowed to reach its full employment target... and would like to see its expansion to meet the needs of the system.”*

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)



In order to achieve an acceptable psychologist-to-student ratio of 1:3,500 in 2015, there is a need for 250 psychologists. Based on current and projected population growth this figure will have risen to 267 psychologists by 2021 (see pages 6, 7, 8). These psychologist to student ratios exclude the additional psychologists necessary to provide a service to early years education and Youthreach settings. At least another 20-30 additional psychologists are needed to provide a service in these settings.

This is the only realistic staffing complement if we are to enable psychologists to provide a quality service to primary and post-primary schools, and their students. While NEPS continues to provide a highly valued service to primary and post-primary schools, current staffing does not allow psychologists to offer the full range of services they are trained and qualified to provide. Expanding NEPS would enable psychologists working in the education system to deliver a high quality psychological service to all students, parents and school communities.

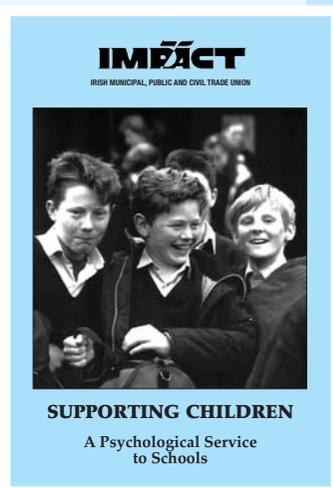
IMPACT is fully aware of the resourcing difficulties the current Government faces. At this point we need to collaborate and plan to provide a fully resourced psychological service to schools. This document aims to begin a public discussion on what this will entail as we cannot afford the luxury of assuming that we can wait for better times to put this into practice.

# Introduction

In October 1996 IMPACT published *Supporting Children: A Psychological Service to Schools* where it identified the urgent need to provide a comprehensive psychological service to all schools. This was widely supported by all of the partners in education at the time. It was recommended to the Government that:

- A comprehensive nationwide psychological service, incorporating support for children, teachers and parents should be developed urgently;
- A team approach should be used and the service developed as an integrated one for primary and post-primary;
- The work of the service should incorporate individual casework, consultation and collaboration with teachers and parents, contribution to in-service training for teachers, and project and research work;
- Resources should be allocated on a phased basis until the service is adequately staffed. This would require approximately 215 psychologists, excluding appropriate senior and middle-management grades;
- The scope of the service should be extended to cover pre-school children and young people out of school;
- An appropriate management structure should be put in place.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was established by (what was then) the Department of Education and Science in 1999. Since then educational psychology practice in Ireland has evolved considerably. After sixteen years it is timely to review progress in order to reflect on what has been achieved and what needs to happen for the National Educational Psychological Service to reach its full potential as a key component of the Irish education system.



# Background

*“A properly resourced psychological service is a vital component of our education system. The challenges posed by large classes, and an increasingly diverse body of pupils, means that the need for a psychological service has never been greater. The absence of an adequately resourced service means that children with psychological needs are not receiving the attention they deserve.”*

Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)



Since its inception in 1999 the mission of the National Educational Psychological Service *“is to work with others to support the personal, social and educational development of **all** children through the application of psychological theory and practice in education, having particular regard for children with special educational needs”*. These goals remain as relevant today as they were in 1999 and are central to the role that educational psychologists play in the Irish education system.

The *Report of the Planning Group* (Department of Education & Science, 1998) detailed that NEPS should have a staffing complement of 200 psychologists to provide a psychological service to all primary and post-primary schools. This estimate was based on a student population of 814,800 in 1998. The student population is now estimated to be 882,808, an increase of 8.3%, and is expected to grow to 934,205 in 2021, an increase of 15%.

At present there are 173 psychologists providing a service to **all** primary and post-primary schools across the country. Psychologists often carry a caseload of over 35 schools, frequently servicing a school population of over 5,500 students. In rural areas they have the additional difficulty of covering large geographical areas. Taking the original estimate for 200 psychologists and adding the 8.3% growth in student numbers, would necessitate 217 psychologists at present. This would increase to 229 psychologists by 2021 given a growth of 15% in student numbers.

**TABLE 1: International ratios of students to school Psychologists**  
(Jimerson et al., 2009)

Rank	Country	Psychologist to student ratio
1	Israel	636
2	Denmark	927
3	Estonia	1,072
4	Lithuania	1,111
5	Switzerland	1,229
6	Turkey	1,267
7	Spain	1,294
8	Canada	1,335
9	Scotland	1,378
10	United States	1,506
11	Australia	1,587
12	Netherlands	1,692
13	Finland	2,384
14	Norway	2,478
15	France	2,783
16	Syria	2,791
17	Greece	3,066
18	United Kingdom (England & Wales)	3,197
19	New Zealand	3,436
20	Slovakia	3,637
21	Cyprus	3,658
22	Japan	4,151
23	Romania	4,316
24	Georgia	4,974
25	Malta	4,991
<b>26</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>5,298</b>
27	Hungary	6,218
28	Puerto Rico	6,705
29	China - Hong Kong	7,785
30	United Arab Emirates	8,108
31	South Africa	8,916
32	Albania	8,992
33	Germany	9,482
	<b>Mean Average</b>	<b>3,709</b>

Note: these are the most up-to-date international comparisons

*“IMPACT members working as Special Needs Assistants and secretarial support recognise the importance of early intervention to address issues affecting the ability of individual students to learn. Investment in Educational Psychologists pays dividends.”*

IMPACT members working in schools and colleges

A study completed by Jimerson et al. (2009) examining international ratios of school psychologists to students found that Ireland ranked 26th out of 33 countries, with an overall ratio of one psychologist to 5,298 students (see table 1). In comparison to this, in Scotland (which shares many demographic characteristics with Ireland), the ratio is one psychologist to 1,378 students. Finland, which consistently tops international evaluations of excellence in education, has a ratio of 1:2,384.

For Ireland to deliver a school psychological service, that is in keeping with international standards, a ratio of one school psychologist to 3,500 students is recommended. This would require the immediate employment of at least 250 psychologists in the National Educational Psychological Service in 2015, and 267 psychologists by 2021.

In the following pages, we outline our vision for a high quality psychological service to schools that will meet the highest international standards.

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# *Role of the educational psychologist*



Educational psychologists work at multiple levels taking into account that a child is not independent from the system of which they are part (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This often leads to psychological consultation, assessment and intervention at the individual and systems levels within schools. Psychologists are trained in utilising problem based frameworks which require the generation of hypotheses supported by psychological theory and practice. This ensures that the advice given to schools about individual children and wider school systems is founded on *evidence based practice* as opposed to approaches which are less likely to lead to effective outcomes.

The complexity of this work requires psychologists working in the National Educational Psychological Service to become deeply involved in the ongoing work of each school community and to develop trusting and positive working relationships with school staff, students and parents.

## Special educational needs

Educational psychologists engage most directly with students who have Special Educational Needs (SEN). They work with parents, students and teachers to determine a child's needs through a process of observation, consultation and/or assessment. In this way they engage in a problem-solving process to ensure better outcomes for the student. The unique set of skills each psychologist brings to working with students who have additional needs allows them to understand fully what is needed at an individual, class and whole-school level. This distinctive contribution makes the NEPS essential in order to support the inclusion of students with SEN in primary and post-primary schools across the country.

The phased implementation of the *Disability Act 2005* and *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004* has led to greater identification of children with SEN. A study by Banks and McCoy in 2011 found that one in four Irish students have a form of special educational need. **This equates to 217,000 students.** In recent years there has been exponential growth in the number of special classes sited in mainstream schools to over 900. To date this growth has mainly been in the primary sector, however significant growth in the number of special classes in the post-primary sector is anticipated in the coming years. **At present NEPS provides support to all of these classes, and to some preschool autism classes in mainstream/special schools, but it is clear that psychologists are currently unable to provide the breadth of service needed to meet the complex needs of these children due to already high caseloads and numbers of schools.** Just half of special schools currently

*"IPPN very strongly supports much needed expansion to the NEPS services. Schools and school principals badly need NEPS support in looking after the well-being of all students. At the moment, NEPS are confined to providing a limited number of assessments to some schools. An expanded school psychological service will cater for the needs of all children in schools, not just those who present with complex needs."*

Irish Primary Principals' Network

receive a school psychological service. Various reports have highlighted that more psychologists are needed in order to provide a reasonable service to these students.

## Mental health, behaviour and emotional well-being

In recent times there has been much greater awareness of the importance of well-being and mental health amongst children and young people. *The Report of the Planning Group* (1998) estimated that 4% of students have an emotional and/or behavioural disorder. In 2012 the Growing Up in Ireland study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimated that **15-20% of students now have significant emotional or behavioural difficulties**. Many of these students are unable to access appropriate clinical supports for a variety of reasons and are reliant on schools to help meet their needs.

Educational psychologists are the mental health professionals most embedded in the education system across the country. Their knowledge of psychological theory and practice relating to mental health, learning, emotional well-being and behaviour means that they offer a unique skillset in this specialist area.

Psychologists from NEPS currently provide a wide range of supports to students presenting with mental health difficulties, including psychological consultation with parents and school staff and direct work with students themselves. Best practice guidelines to promote well-being in primary and post-primary schools have been authored and published by

*“Inclusion Ireland is the national organisation that represents persons with an intellectual disability and their families. One key area of Inclusion Ireland’s work is in the field of education. NEPS psychologists do an excellent job supporting children with SEN and the people who teach them. The problem is that there are not enough NEPS psychologists meaning that some children spend years waiting on assessment and appropriate educational supports. Inclusion Ireland calls on the Department of Education and Skills to invest in the future of Irish children by increasing the number of NEPS psychologists.”*

Inclusion Ireland



psychologists working in NEPS. Training for teachers in evidence based approaches and interventions such as the *FRIENDS for Life* emotional resilience programme and the *Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management* programme are also offered where possible. However, current staffing numbers of psychologists means that the needs of vulnerable students are often not fully met.

## Critical incident response

In times of crisis the National Educational Psychological Service provides support and advice to school communities. This support has been highly valued, particularly in complex cases where there has been particular trauma in school communities as a result of critical incidents. Psychologists from NEPS also endeavour to work proactively with schools to prepare for and prevent critical incidents occurring through policy development and staff training.

Guidelines and resource materials have been produced for schools which have received international recognition as a model of best practice. Having greater numbers of psychologists would enable NEPS staff to engage in much more preventative work with schools and relevant stakeholders within the community.

## Whole school support

Many difficulties encountered by primary and post-primary schools require approaches involving the whole school community. Educational psychologists encourage and support schools to develop more systematic ways of meeting the needs of students in their school, based on best practice models such as the *NEPS*





*Continuum of Support.* **The allocation of fewer schools and reduced caseloads would enable psychologists to provide enhanced support and guidance at a systems level by being truly embedded within the school community. IMPACT asserts that this can only happen by reducing the psychologist to student ratio so that it is in line with international standards.**

## Prevention and development work

It is widely acknowledged that the prevention of difficulties is preferable to crisis intervention. In a recent policy document *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures - The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*; (Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2014) the government has committed to 'rebalancing resources to place greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention, the aim of which is to gradually transfer resources over time from crisis to early points of intervention' (p.8). It is argued that 'we invest in children and young people because it is an intrinsically good thing to do. It also makes sense for the good of society and for the long term benefit of the economy' (p.17).

IMPACT agrees wholeheartedly with these sentiments. However, despite the best efforts of psychologists, the demand from schools to deal with urgent cases means that preventative work is often a reduced priority. A properly resourced psychological service would enable psychologists to apply their knowledge and skills to promote preventative approaches and further develop the skills of school staff.

Psychologists are highly trained in research and evaluation. Having dedicated time for this important task would allow psychologists to use these skills to evaluate the effectiveness of the various educational and support interventions. This would ensure that decisions about how to use scarce resources are formed on a sound evidence base. Whilst psychologists in NEPS have engaged in this work with research into literacy and emotional resilience programmes, the scope for this has been limited due to the need to provide a frontline psychological service to students, parents and teachers.

## Supporting the educational system as a whole

The National Educational Psychological Service has an important role to play in advising the Department of Education and Skills in a wide range of areas. Educational psychologists have expertise and training in areas such as learning, behaviour, cognition, emotional development, social development, mental health, evidence based practice and systems change. Psychologists are trained in using scientific research methods that enable them to determine which approaches are most effective from an impact and cost perspective. For example, psychologists from NEPS have demonstrated their commitment to support and promote the National Literacy Strategy by producing *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years* and conducting a large scale study researching the most effective interventions for struggling readers. This led to students making significant improvements in their reading skills over a short period of time. The guidelines have since been distributed to schools across the country and are freely accessible on the

*“Our schools rely on NEPS to assist and advise them in supporting students with a wide range of special educational needs. However, access to the services of NEPS is far short of what is required. The required interaction between schools and NEPS will not be possible unless NEPS is adequately resourced.”*

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools



Association of  
Community and  
Comprehensive Schools

Cumann na  
Scoilleana Pobail  
agus Cúimsitheacha

Department of Education and Skill's website. This is just one example of the added value a properly resourced school psychological service can bring to inform educational policy at a national level.



## Early years education and Youthreach

Educational psychologists are trained to work with children and young people aged 0-19. At present NEPS does not provide a service to children in early years settings (ages 0-4/5 approximately), despite the obvious needs that arise in this group of approximately 67,000 children, and only provides a limited service to Youthreach/community training centres. Extending the psychological service to preschool settings would enable psychologists to intervene at an earlier stage and prevent the onset of severe and enduring difficulties in later childhood and adulthood. It would also support children with additional needs, and their parents,

in the often difficult transition to primary school. In addition, the Youthreach programme is delivered in 106 Youthreach centres and 35 community training centres nationally, serving a particularly vulnerable population of approximately 6,000 young people aged between 15 and 20 years. A provisional estimate would indicate that 20 to 30 additional psychologists would be required to meet these needs.

It is the stated aim of the Department of Education and Skills to 'raise the quality of provision in Early Childhood and Education settings'. An expanded school psychological service would play a vital role in realising this aim.



## In summary

It is imperative that all students aged 0-19, their parents and teachers have access to a high quality school psychological service to promote evidence based interventions and better outcomes. Whilst the National Educational Psychological Service currently offers a highly valued service to all primary and post-primary schools, the current staffing complement is insufficient to meet current and future demand.



*“Psychological services have contracted during the moratorium and it is our view that these services now need to be restored to their full complement of staff. It would be opportune to expand the psychological services available to schools (the NEPS, DDLETB, and CDETB) to redress the loss of personnel in recent years and to address the growth in the population being served.”*

Dublin & Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board



**etb**

Boord Oideachais agus Oiliána  
Atha Cliath agus Iarthair  
Dublin and Dún Laoghaire  
Education and Training Board

# *What is needed now*

Over the last sixteen years, the National Educational Psychological Service has provided a high quality service to schools. NEPS has operated within an Employment Control Framework (ECF) while, nonetheless, providing a quality service to all mainstream schools across the country. Any further expansion of the service will require increased investment, and there is no doubt that the scope of what can be achieved is limited without greater resourcing.

It is clear that the ECF has limited the ability of NEPS to provide the comprehensive school psychological service required for modern Irish society. IMPACT highlights the need for collaboration and deliberation on what is needed to provide a better resourced psychological service to schools and takes this opportunity to begin public discussion on what this will entail. IMPACT is cognisant of the resourcing difficulties the current Government faces, however we call on the Minister for Education and Skills to address the current shortfall in funding for psychological services to schools.

Given the existing and forecasted growth in population IMPACT believes that

1. **250** psychologists are required immediately to have an acceptable psychologist-to-student ratio in 2015.
2. By 2021 this figure will have risen to **267** psychologists in order to continue to have an acceptable psychologist-to-student ratio.



3. Having such a staffing complement would enable psychologists to provide a quality service to students and primary and post-primary schools.
4. These psychologist to student ratios exclude the additional psychologists necessary to provide a service to early years and Youthreach settings. A provisional estimate would indicate that 20 to 30 additional psychologists would be required to meet this need.

Whilst NEPS is currently offering a highly valued psychological service to primary and post-primary schools, current staffing does not allow psychologists to offer the full range of services they are trained and qualified to provide.

IMPACT contends that expanding the National Educational Psychological Service is necessary in order to enable psychologists working in the education system to deliver a high quality psychological service to students, parents and school communities. Such a service expansion will help deliver better outcomes for all children and young people and ensure a school psychological service in Ireland that we can all be proud of as we move forward.

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*To date approximately 3,000 teachers have accessed Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management training delivered by NEPS psychologists. This is an evidence based 5/6 day training programme for teachers designed to strengthen their classroom management skills and promote children's social and emotional competence.*

*The FRIENDS Programmes are evidence based for pupils aged 4-16+ which were designed to reduce and prevent anxiety, as well as promoting resilience through teaching coping and problem solving skills. Over 1,800 primary and post primary teachers have accessed this two day training provided by NEPS. Increased staffing would allow NEPS to deliver 40 programmes annually, reaching 1,000 teachers and 25,000 pupils per annum.*

*A large scale NEPS study in Waterford (N=200) indicated that children with literacy difficulties could make 1 year's progress in literacy over a three month period of intervention, using the resources currently available in schools.*

*Nerney's Court, Dublin 1. Ph: 01-817-1500 • Email: [info@impact.ie](mailto:info@impact.ie)*

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