

Board of Management Agreed Report 8th February 2023

The Board appointed Finn Ó Murchú as acting Chairperson for the purposes of this meeting and is awaiting the appointment of a patron nominee to fill a vacancy on the Board.

Condolences were extended to Jennifer Kelleher, Bus Escort, on the death of her mother.

The Board ratified the school's Critical Incident Management Plan. This plan helps the school management and staff to react quickly and effectively in the event of an incident that may overwhelm the normal coping mechanism of the school and follows training with the National Educational Psychological Service.

The Board also ratified changes to the school's admissions policy following the issuing to schools of Circular 75/2022, and the Commencement of the Education (Provision in respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022 and remaining sections of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

Despite having no places available for September 2023, the school has received many applications for its waiting list if places become available. The Board conducted lotteries to establish these waiting lists.

The Board also discussed issues of major concern, specifically:

1. The lack of therapeutic services
2. The withdrawal of services to families by certain disability service providers based on the school attended by a child

To update everyone and set out where things now stand, the Board wants to clarify the following:

Since the school opened in September 2021, the issue of the lack of disability services to children attending here has been a pressing issue for the entire school community. This was believed to be a consequence of the delays in the HSE's implementing the Progressing Disability Services (PDS) model, the pandemic, and the withdrawal of therapy supports in special schools.

Special school principals across Cork had met and shared concerns about these issues and worked together to raise this issue with the Departments of Health and of Education. In April of 2022, Minister Anne Rabbitte, Minister of State for Disability, held public meetings on disability services. Parents from our school were encouraged to attend as this was an important opportunity to convey directly to government members what the impact of disability services meant on the ground for families.

To capture fully what the lack of therapy supports has meant for our students, school management conducted a survey among families later in April. 23 out of 32 families responded. The report established many things, which are summarised here. Our 23 families were attached to 7 different Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) across Cork city and county and most (17) expressed a preference to transferring to the one that the school is located in (Carrigaline-Kinsale-Bandon).

Nearly all families had been recommended for Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy Supports. 19 families were receiving none at the time and 8 had never received any supports. While many (17) had received training events and information sessions, nearly all families (21) believed they needed home visits, including

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parent coaching, school/ preschool visits, etc. It was also reported that many families had incurred significant financial expense to cater for their children's needs. Other families simply could not meet the costs involved. In some cases, the estimated cost experienced ran to the tens of thousands of Euro. Most families (21) also reported that they believed that Speech and Language and Occupational Therapy would be best accessed through in-school supports. Behavioural therapy was also much demanded. (16 families)

Another very serious issue came to light in the parent responses, which was that at least one family has been told that they ceased to be eligible for home supports and respite not because their child had been transferred to another CDNT but simply because he was now enrolled in a Cork Education and Training Board (CETB) patron school and not one patronised by the service provider. This was later confirmed at meetings with the CDNT involved and has since been confirmed by other families in communication with their CDNTs.

This means that, quite apart from having inadequate services through PDS, families may have even less services because they are enrolled in a CETB school. This apparently discriminatory practice would further disadvantage families in difficult circumstances, many of whom enrolled here because they had no effective choice, given the lack of special school places in Cork at the time. Such a decision would also greatly undermine the credibility of the patron as an effective provider of special education. Having considered the report at the Board's meeting in May, the Board of Management agreed to submit the report to our patron body, CETB, and did so in the first week of June 2022.

The availability of school-based therapy supports as well as the practice among certain CDNTs of withholding respite and home supports based on the school a child attended were reported widely in the media during the summer. Both parents and management of special schools in Cork met with government towards the end of the summer, and a commitment was later given to restore therapy supports to schools by the end of 2022.

After the summer, the Board raised the issue again with our patron in September, as well as the issue of education and care pathways for children attending the school as they approach adulthood. Among many parents, there is a concern that the withdrawal of supports may extend into the ability to access Adult Day Services for children once they reach school leaving age. The Board's Chairperson raised the matter at a meeting of Cork Education and Training Board later in 2022.

Cork Parents Unite, a group of parents advocating on behalf of their children who attend the school, met with Denis Leamy (CETB's CEO), Pat McKelvey (Director of Schools) and Carol Neenan (Active Inclusion) in late January 2023. At the meeting parents outlined their serious and real concerns relating to how the patronage of the school is impacting on eligibility for services through other HSE providers, and the serious concerns that such practices will continue into Adult Day Services. Discussion was had around the lack of therapeutic interventions within the school. This was an open and frank discussion, very well received on both sides, with a view to working collaboratively, for the benefit of all children attending the school.

The Board is actively seeking an update from our patron body on these and other issues and has requested a meeting with our CEO. School management as well as the CETB's CEO and Director of Schools plan to meet with the HSE on the provision of Adult Day Services in March. The promised restoration of therapy supports to special schools has not yet transpired.

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The Board wishes families to know that it takes these matters very seriously and will work tirelessly on our students' behalf. CETB has expressed a preference for future engagement with all parents on these matters to be via the Parents Association, which the Board hopes will be re-established shortly. The Board encourages all parents to become as involved as possible in whatever way and hopes that the school, families, Board and CETB will work together to achieve our shared goal, which is the best possible outcomes for our students.