

Dear MLA

Recently you helped my child (with Downs Syndrome) in obtaining appropriate assistance in line with current legislation to attend Nursery School from September 2015.

Once again I thank you and am just letting you know that the Education Board eventually produced a SEN document that met their needs, and we are liaising with the school in order to plan for their attendance.

When I met with you, you kindly agreed to take on board any comments I may have on the proposed SEN bill currently in the consultation phase.

Having read the document and looked at the comments by SENAC among others

<http://www.senac.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/KeyMessagesonSENBillPDF.pdf>

there is not much to have great concern about in the aspirations of the bill as there is little to be feared from a better service for children with genuine learning difficulties, other than financial pressures on the Education sector.

My greatest concern with the process is the implementation of the measures set out in the bill.

In my experience (admittedly a sample size of 1), the education boards (as they were then) have a particular way of doing things which does not always tally with the legal framework. An example being that in my child's case 2 draft Statements were issued that clearly did not meet the requirements of the law in terms of Therapies and Adult assistance being specified and quantified. When this deficiency was highlighted by me to the education board, verbally, by email and by letter, there was no rectification to make the Statement lawful until your intervention.

It would appear to me that it would be in everyone's interest if draft Statements were issued that meet the requirements of the law.

To that end, and coming from an accountancy background where the maxim "What gets measured gets done" was drummed into me at an early age, perhaps there should be some requirement in the bill to include a reporting mechanism to the Minister (and to be regularly assessed by the Education Committee) the absolute numbers of draft and final Statements issued each month, and the absolute numbers of draft and final statements that comply with the law in terms of timescales, and meeting the specified and quantified requirements of extra provision.

The Education Authority would need to provide a reason (not just some sort of bland catch all - "unusual circumstance" - excuse ) why the draft and Final Statements do not comply with the law.

There should also be a provision for an annual audit of these reports by the NI Audit Office, Comptroller and Auditor General to assess the accuracy of reporting with real consequences for inaccurate or incomplete reporting such as a requirement to explain same before your committee.

I appreciate there are a considerable number of children being presented as potentially having special education requirements, and I further appreciate that there is a level of professional judgement in many cases to assess if the child in question does have special education needs and this can be a complex process. I also understand there is an element of an industry around having a special education needs diagnosis which drives people to seek a diagnosis when perhaps their child is just on the lower end of the scale academically (just as I am as slow as a carthorse in a running race).

There are children however (including some that attend Mencap's Segal House Nursery) who do not get the specified support they need to attend mainstream because of the lack of issuing Statements that are in line with the law, and it would be the least that can be done to ensure these children who genuinely are among the most vulnerable in our society get the help they need to be the best that they can be.

This also has a positive long term benefit for society as these children are likely to require less state intervention in the long term.

Apologies for this stream of consciousness email, but I thought it best to correspond with you when I had the time.

Regards