

**Integrated AlumNI
Submission
to the
Special Education Provision
Consultation**



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Excutive Summery

Special education has long been one of the most genuinely integrated parts of Northern Ireland's education system, bringing together children from different backgrounds and abilities to learn side by side.

These settings have shown what inclusive, needs-led education can deliver. As we consider the future of SEND provision, it is important to recognise this role and ensure the sector receives the strategic planning and investment it needs to continue supporting all pupils effectively.

To secure a sustainable and equitable SEND system, urgent action is required to ensure proper planning, professional investment, and fair participation by all school sectors.

Key Actions:

- Develop and implement a workforce strategy for training, upskilling, and retaining SEND specialists.
- Expand Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and create a postgraduate qualification route in SEND.
- Ensure equitable resource allocation and accountability across all school sectors, including grammar schools.
- Require all qualifying teachers to receive robust SEND and anti-bias training.
- Conduct a system-wide review of selective admissions and their impact on inclusion.
- Introduce criteria and structured support for gifted and talented pupils within SEND frameworks.

Workforce Planning and Development

There is currently no meaningful workforce-planning strategy to train, retain, or upskill the educational professionals required to support SEND provision in Northern Ireland. At present, four institutions deliver Initial Teacher Education, yet only one, Stranmillis University College, offers any specialised preparation for work in special education, and even this is delivered on a very small scale, with around 14-16 places per year. Meanwhile, one of the two main teaching colleges, St Mary's University College, continues to provide its ITE programmes through an explicitly Catholic-informed ethos while receiving public funding, and does not directly contribute to SEND workforce development through an explicit teaching programme like its sister college.

The absence of coordinated planning across the system means that Northern Ireland lacks a pipeline of teachers with the specialist competencies needed to meet future demand. Crucially, all qualifying teachers should receive far more substantial training in identifying, supporting, and understanding SEND, including robust anti-bias training to ensure that unconscious assumptions do not disadvantage pupils with additional needs. Without a structured approach to training, upskilling, and retaining specialists, including educational psychologists, who are already in critically short supply, neither the Department of Education nor the Education Authority will ever be able to meet the strategic SEND targets outlined in the EA's 2022–2027 area plan or to prepare for the significant rise in pupils with SEND anticipated by 2030.

There is currently no postgraduate route in Northern Ireland for teachers to gain a specialist qualification in SEND, despite the pressing need for staff in this sector. By contrast, the system provides 20 PGCE training places for Irish Medium education, which serves fewer schools than the SEND sector. It is inequitable that a structured development pathway exists for Irish Medium education while no equivalent strategy or training provision has been created for pupils with SEND, whose needs are more urgent and expanding.

Integrated Provision for SEND in Mainstream Schools

Special education provision remains unevenly distributed across grammar and non-selective schools, leaving the greatest responsibility with mainstream settings. The Integrated Education sector in Northern Ireland contributes disproportionately to its size in supporting pupils with additional needs every day and does so inequitably to other school sectors. Mainstream schools typically educate far higher numbers of pupils with statements or additional support needs, and they do so while managing broader classroom complexity and higher support demands. By contrast, Grammar schools use selective testing as a crucial criterion for admission and admit fewer pupils with complex needs and therefore encounter less day-to-day pressure on specialist support, classroom adjustments, and pastoral systems.

The Committee will recall the evidence provided by the Education Authority's Dale Hannah in June, where he confirmed that no grammar school in Northern Ireland currently operates specialist provision (e.g. through the provision of an SPIM) for pupils with additional needs, and that exploratory discussions on developing such provision have only recently begun. For a sector long established within our education system, this lack of engagement with specialist provision is difficult to reconcile, particularly when compared with the integrated post-primary sector. Many integrated schools operate hybrid admissions models that include both SEAG entrants and pupils admitted through non-academic criteria, demonstrating that selective intake and meaningful inclusion are not incompatible. Despite being a much newer part of the educational landscape, integrated schools have taken concrete steps to welcome and support pupils across a full range of abilities.

This contrast is especially concerning for a specific profile of learner whose needs are often overlooked: pupils with special educational needs at the higher-ability end, including those identified as gifted and talented. Exceptional learning ability is not currently diagnosed as a special or additional need in Northern Ireland, and there is no current criterion to identify such learners. The absence of specialist provision within the grammar sector leaves these learners without appropriate, structured support and represents a significant gap in the overall system's capacity to meet diverse needs. The current imbalance means that the schools educating the highest-need pupils face the most strain. A system-wide review of support structures, resource allocation, and statutory responsibilities is needed to ensure that all schools, including selective schools, play a fair and active role in meeting the needs of pupils with SEND.

Moving Forward

The challenges outlined above cannot be addressed without a coordinated, long-term strategy that strengthens the workforce, expands specialist training, and ensures all schools, grammar and non-selective alike, play a full part in supporting pupils with SEND. There is much to be commended in the committee taking such an interest in this issue.

Further, the Minister should be commended for the investment his department has put into investing in SEND and the consideration given to the recent Transform Ed strategy. An equity of strategy and consideration should be given to the issues outlined above. Meaningful reform is both overdue and essential if the system is to meet rising need and uphold its commitment to fairness and, most importantly, its commitment to improving the lives of children across Northern Ireland.

Acronym	Meaning
EA	Education Authority
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SPiM	Special Provision in Mainstream
SEAG	Schools' Entrance Assessment Group