

Dear Sir/Madam,

I work in a special school, and everyone who works there truly loves what they do. We are passionate about supporting our pupils and helping them reach their full potential. However, there are several serious issues that must be addressed to ensure that both staff and pupils receive the support, respect, and resources they deserve — not only in special schools but also in mainstream schools, where children with additional needs often face similar challenges.

1. Fair Pay for Classroom Assistants

Classroom assistants are the backbone of every school, whether special or mainstream. We do far more than support children with their learning — we are caregivers, medical responders, emotional anchors, therapists, educators, and advocates all in one.

In both settings, staff provide personal care, assist with mobility, manage medical needs, support pupils with behavioural and sensory needs, and deliver tailored learning activities. Despite this, our pay does not reflect the complexity, professionalism, and responsibility the role demands.

Low pay leads to recruitment and retention problems, affecting stability for children in both special and mainstream schools. A structured pay review is needed to ensure wages reflect the skills, dedication, and emotional labour of classroom assistants across the education system.

2. Full-Time On-Site Nurse

Every school supporting children with medical needs, including mainstream schools with pupils who require daily care, should have access to at least one full-time, on-site nurse.

In both settings, classroom staff are often expected to manage medical interventions such as administering medication, monitoring blood sugar, suctioning, tube feeding, or responding to seizures. Currently, many

schools rely on part-time nursing support or untrained staff, creating a high-risk environment for both children and staff.

A full-time nurse would not only provide immediate medical care but also offer staff training and support, reduce anxiety around medical emergencies, and liaise with parents and healthcare professionals. It would ensure children's medical needs are met without disrupting learning and allow teachers and classroom assistants to focus on teaching and inclusion.

In mainstream schools, where children with complex needs are increasingly included in regular classrooms, having on-site nursing support is equally essential to ensure equitable access to education and safety for all pupils.

3. Access to SEN Statements

The process for obtaining a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) is often lengthy, bureaucratic, and inconsistent, affecting children in both special and mainstream schools. Many children are denied statements because standardised academic testing does not fully capture their needs.

Children may excel academically yet struggle with communication, organisation, self-care, social skills, or emotional regulation. Without a statement, they are less likely to receive personalised support, therapy, or reasonable adjustments in the classroom, which can limit their learning, independence, and long-term outcomes.

All children with a confirmed diagnosis — regardless of test scores — should automatically be eligible for a statement. In addition, the process should be streamlined, with clear timelines, transparent criteria, and reduced bureaucracy. Mainstream schools, in particular, often lack the resources to support children effectively without formal recognition of their needs. Faster access to statements ensures children receive timely interventions, fostering inclusion and equity.

4. Better Staffing Ratios

Staffing ratios in schools directly impact safety, learning, and emotional support for pupils. In both special and mainstream schools, low staff-to-pupil ratios mean that children requiring one-to-one support often do not receive sufficient attention, while staff are stretched beyond safe limits.

In special schools, children may have complex physical, medical, or behavioural needs requiring intensive support. In mainstream schools,

children with additional needs may be included in general classrooms without extra staffing, leading to overlooked needs and increased stress for all pupils.

Implementing minimum staffing ratios tailored to the needs of each classroom would ensure that every child receives the support they require. One-to-one or small-group support should be standard for pupils with high needs, and additional assistants should be allocated to mainstream classrooms where inclusion of children with disabilities or complex needs is taking place. Adequate staffing reduces stress, improves educational outcomes, and allows staff to focus on teaching rather than crisis management.

5. More Therapy and Specialist Support Services

Children in both special and mainstream schools rely on therapies such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and psychological services. Unfortunately, access to these services is often inconsistent, delayed, or insufficient, leading to lost skills, frustration, and regression.

Therapy is essential, not optional. Teachers and classroom assistants may implement therapy programmes, but without trained professionals guiding interventions, children cannot achieve their full potential.

Special schools should have regular on-site or visiting therapists, and mainstream schools should also have access to these services to support inclusion and early intervention. Early support in mainstream classrooms can prevent children from falling behind academically or socially, reduce behavioural challenges, and promote integration alongside peers.

The Department of Education and the Department of Health must deliver integrated therapy provision across all schools, with consistent, timely, and tailored services. Funding must be ring-fenced to ensure children receive the support they need without lengthy waiting lists or inequitable access. Investing in therapy supports both children's development and teachers' ability to deliver inclusive education.

6. Mental Health Support for Staff and Pupils

The emotional demands on staff in both special and mainstream schools are significant. Staff support pupils with complex medical, social, and

behavioural needs while also managing high workloads and emotional labour. Many experience stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue, which impacts staff retention and pupil outcomes.

Access to confidential counselling, well-being programmes, and regular reflective practice is essential for staff. These measures ensure staff can maintain resilience, manage stress, and continue providing high-quality care and education.

Pupils, too, require access to mental health services, especially those with additional needs or who experience trauma. Schools should have on-site or visiting mental health professionals, including counsellors or psychologists, in both special and mainstream settings. Supporting mental health enhances learning, social inclusion, and emotional regulation, benefiting the entire school community.

7. Adequate Funding for Resources and Equipment

Children with additional needs require specialised equipment and resources to access learning fully. This includes communication devices, sensory tools, adaptive furniture, visual timetables, and accessible outdoor areas.

Special schools often lack adequate funding, leading staff to fundraise or use personal money to purchase essential items. Mainstream schools are increasingly including children with additional needs but often lack access to necessary resources, limiting inclusion and educational opportunities.

The Department of Education should provide ring-fenced funding, conduct annual resource audits, and establish shared resource networks to ensure all schools — special and mainstream — can access up-to-date equipment. Adequate resourcing is vital for equality, inclusion, and learning outcomes.

8. Better Transport Arrangements

Children who travel long distances to school, whether to special schools or mainstream schools with specialist units, face fatigue, stress, and missed learning time.

Transport arrangements should be reviewed to ensure safety, accessibility, and timeliness. Localised school provision, accessible vehicles, trained escorts, and contingency plans for delays should be implemented.

Reducing travel time allows pupils to arrive ready to learn and improves attendance and wellbeing in both mainstream and special schools.

9. Clearer Communication and Support from the Education Authority

Delays in communication, assessments, and placement decisions create stress and uncertainty for families and staff in both special and mainstream schools.

The Education Authority should ensure transparent communication, clear timelines, and a partnership approach with school leaders and parents. Each school should have access to a dedicated SEN liaison officer to address concerns promptly. Improved communication ensures equitable access to support for all children, regardless of the type of school they attend.

10. Recognition and Respect for School Staff

Staff in both special and mainstream schools provide physically, emotionally, and educationally demanding work that is often undervalued or overlooked.

Recognition through fair pay, professional titles, improved working conditions, and inclusion in decision-making processes is essential. Staff who feel respected and supported are more likely to remain in their roles, reducing turnover and improving outcomes for all children. Recognition should apply system-wide to ensure every child benefits from skilled, motivated, and valued staff.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider these points. Meaningful change is urgently needed to ensure that all schools — special and mainstream — continue to be safe, supportive, inclusive, and well-resourced environments for every child and every member of staff.

The work we do in classrooms is physically demanding, emotionally exhausting, and intellectually complex. We support children with medical needs, behavioural challenges, learning difficulties, and social and emotional struggles, often simultaneously, and we do so under conditions that do not adequately recognise or reward our efforts. These challenges are compounded by insufficient staffing, limited access to therapy,

outdated resources, and the pressures of supporting both pupils and families.

We strongly encourage decision-makers to spend a week doing the work we do, under the current pay and conditions outlined above. Experiencing firsthand the daily responsibilities of caring for, teaching, and safeguarding children would provide a clear understanding of how challenging our jobs are. It would also demonstrate why every point in this letter — from fair pay to improved staffing, therapy access, mental health support, and resources — is not only justified but essential.

By witnessing the reality of our work, policymakers would see that our roles are far more than “just a job” — they require skill, patience, empathy, and resilience every single day. Without proper recognition and support, schools risk losing experienced, dedicated staff, which would directly affect the quality of education, care, and outcomes for children across Northern Ireland.

We are proud of the work we do and the difference we make in the lives of children, but passion alone cannot sustain this profession. To ensure all children, whether in special or mainstream schools, receive the education, care, and support they deserve, urgent action must be taken to implement the changes outlined in this letter.

We urge you to consider these points seriously and act decisively. By valuing and supporting the staff who dedicate their lives to our children, we can create a stronger, more inclusive, and more effective education system — one in which every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Yours faithfully,

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