

Dear Mr Mathison,

I saw your video asking for views on special needs provision in NI. I am a Mainstream Nursery Teacher of 11 years. We are feeling very deflated, over looked and undervalued in the education system. This is massively to do with the amount of children coming into our settings with special educational needs. While we have the absolute privilege of being these children's first educators, we also are at a massive disadvantage with regards to special educational needs. Educational Psychology won't even see these children until 3 months has passed and a lot of these children are not known to outside services. We are given no extra support because the children do not have statements of special needs and all too many times, year upon year we put in the hard work, burn ourselves out, complete all the necessary paper work and get everything sorted for the children to have 1 to 1 support in P1. We have 2 adults in the class with 26 children. A ratio of 1:13 with pre school children- ages 3-4. It is not safe, it is not practical and it is not giving the children in our care the education they need. Children are displaying challenging and descriptive behaviour and we do not have enough adults in the room to support them and to provide for their needs. Please raise these issues and support our sector. So many talented, dedicated and amazing staff are leaving because they are totally burnt out.

Children now have so many needs, they aren't all toilet trained when they start with us and so many are needing our support with speech and language, behaviour and emotional regulation. Please help us by speaking up for us for another adult in the room to give these children the best start. I have attached a letter which I sent to the Education minister in June highlighting my concerns. I would really appreciate it being included in your research.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our sector.

Many thanks and kind regards,



Nursery Teacher

Letter to Education Minister

June 2025

Dear Mr Givan,

I am writing to you on behalf of Nursery Teachers in both Nursery Schools and Nursery Units in Northern Ireland. We are asking and proposing that the current staff to pupil ratios are re-considered.

During your time in office as Education Minister so far, it has been very encouraging to see the importance your Department have placed on the significance of the Early Years as a child's first step into education. Our sector has been encouraged by your £1.2million for settings to provide additional support for children with Special Educational Needs and the recognition of the pressures we are facing daily with regards to the increasing needs of our children.

You stated in your introduction of this scheme:

“Pre-school education settings are facing challenges in supporting increasing numbers of children with additional needs in their pre-school year. This additional funding will help settings to support those needs.” This has been extremely beneficial in practice and having an extra adult in the room has really benefited many local settings. It has not only provided support for children with special educational needs but all children in the class.

Our current ratio of 1 adult to 13 children is not working. Each year increasing numbers of children are needing significant levels of support with regards to delayed speech and language skills, behavioural needs, toileting needs and Special Educational Needs. In recent years this has amounted to most settings in our discussion group having at least 1/3 of the mainstream class on personal learning plans.

The ratio of 1 adult to 13 children is not feasible to meet the needs of the children, to provide a stimulating learning environment where adults can spend time interacting with children, to respond to individual needs within the class and to ensure everyone's safety. This not only includes the safety of the children in the room but also the staff who are regularly having to respond to and support extremely challenging and at times aggressive behaviour in a class with 26 children and two adults.

Nursery is such a formative year in a child's life. We all recognise that early intervention is key and as professionals we are so passionate about providing the best educational

start for our children through observing the children, planning for progression and for identifying any support that is needed both internally and from external services.

However we are extremely frustrated. In Nursery, all too often we put in all the work, complete all of the necessary paperwork and make the referrals to Educational Psychology. We recognise that the Special Needs Statementing process is receiving an extensive level of referrals and there is a timeframe in the process however the support is not given to us during the pre-school year while the Statementing process is taking place. The child usually receives a 1 to 1 assistant allocation or a specialist placement for P1. While this is great for the child for P1, it is not in place for the nursery year and we have to manage and try to provide as best as we possibly can for the child (ren) with additional needs who are genuinely needing so much of our time along with the rest of the class.

With multiple and increasing numbers of children in each class each year being referred this is becoming more and more challenging and our staff are feeling very overwhelmed, overstretched and deflated. The current situation and lack of support and is resulting in passionate, skilled and experienced Teachers, Nursery Assistants and practitioners becoming unwell and or sadly leaving the profession. After extensive training, time, effort and genuine dedication to their vocation, this is such a saddening situation which could be prevented.

It is also important to note that settings who are governed by Health and Social Care (HSCNI) childcare settings, including day nurseries and childminders, have specific adult-to-child ratios, with the general rule of one adult for every four children aged two to three, and one for every six children aged four to eight. This adult/ child ratio is significantly higher and recognises the level of need that young children have. Why is there such a significant difference for Education?

As you conclude in your report about the investment scheme: "I hope this fund is welcome news and I will continue to develop solutions and seek funding opportunities to address the range of challenges identified by pre-school settings through the End-to-End Review of SEN." We as a sector would welcome and appreciate the opportunity to consult on this issue and welcome any further and more permanent additional adult staffing in nursery and pre-school settings. Our children deserve the best possible start that we can give them to their educational journey.

I look forward to your response and thank you for your time.

Yours Faithfully,



Nursery Teacher