

SNAs promised for special school will be offered six-week contracts

SCHOOL HAS STAFFING CRISIS AND NOW NEEDS TO FUNDRAISE FOR FACILITIES

By TOM GALVIN

A school for children with special needs, used by students across east Wicklow, that recently got the backing of two Wicklow TDs as it struggled to secure more resources, has turned to an online fundraising platform in a bid to get more funds to meet its needs.

Minister Simon Harris and local TD Jennifer Whitmore both visited Newcourt Special School in October to offer their support for the struggling school, which Deputy Whitmore said was "a lifeline" for many families across Wicklow.

Subsequently, it was confirmed in the Dáil on Tuesday, October 17, to Deputy Whitmore by the Minister of State with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion, Josepha Madigan, that the school would be allocated five special needs assistants (SNAs) to shore up its staffing resources.

However, while news of the additional SNAs was welcomed by the school, it has emerged that the posts are only temporary, just two are currently filled and the positions are on a rolling six-week contract.

Acting Deputy Principal Amanda Flynn said the school has been working for more resources with local politicians and the National Council For Special Education (NCSE), as the latter determines the staffing levels in special schools. Since Newcourt is seriously understaffed and needs teachers, the temporary SNAs are "just a band aid solution".

"Simon Harris was great, he gets it and he understands it, but it's not happening," she said.

"We can't recruit teachers to fill three teaching posts - and that's a countrywide issue at the moment - so they have offered us five temporary SNAs for six weeks," she added.

"It's to be reviewed every six weeks because when they allocated them, they didn't give us any kind of information with regards to contracts.

"And as it's in place of teachers, we thought, if we do get a teacher at the end of the week, what happens to that SNA who has been covering that post?"

"It's hard to get someone to commit to a six-week contract. They're not going to leave another school to come here for six weeks."

Ms Flynn explained that classes that don't have teachers can be split into other classrooms, and the additional SNAs are there



Students at Newcourt Special School in Bray with Deputy Jennifer Whitmore (blue jacket, centre).

for support.

"It's just a band aid solution," she said. "We have only two in place and we are still waiting for the other three. We need 10 full-time SNAs."

While the special school is based in Bray, the catchment area to cater for the county's students who require its services - given there is a lack of special schools in Wicklow - is startling.

"It's Wicklow town, Aughrim, Arklow," Ms Flynn said. "There's a full bus of students coming from Arklow, and there are 12 buses of students coming from all over the county delivering our 102 students to school every day. "Arklow and Aughrim will be the furthest away, some of those students are on the bus for up to an hour-and-a-half each way, every day.

"On a rainy day, that can be even longer with traffic. It's just one of the issues that our students face, that they're not catered for in their own local community. But that's a different issue."

She added: "We have kids who have very complex needs - trauma, medical issues, drop seizures, and the care that is required after

a child has a seizure is hours of one-on-one supervision. They need support going to the toilet.

"Last week, a teacher had to climb over a stall door to get in at a child who had had a seizure in the bathroom.

"If we were an autism school, the maximum number of children in the class would be six - two SNAs in each class and one teacher. A lot of our staff are moving to those types of schools because they are better resourced."

Regarding the ratio of how many teachers and SNAs should be allocated per group of students, Ms Flynn acknowledges that it is not so straightforward and it is the job of the NCSE to crunch those numbers, which she says is down to an "algorithm".

"Your top trumping disability is the only thing that gets resourced," she explained. "So if you have multiple disabilities, like epilepsy, autism, and mild-learning disability, autism is the highest. So you'll just get allocation for that.

"But we are a school for children with mild plus complex needs, so they all have multiple diagnoses.

"You're nearly at a disadvantage for having students with complex needs because you are only getting allocation for one of those needs."

Currently, at the school of 102 students, aged between five and 18, there are 14 class teachers, two special teachers, a home economics teacher and a PE teacher.

However, the home economics teacher has to fill the role of a class teacher, so there is effectively no home economics teacher in the school.

There are 18 SNAs, plus an additional five for students that the school has put in additional applications for and are shared between a group of students and are not one-to-one.

Then there are the five temporary SNAs on the rolling six-week contracts that are not filled.

While the fundraising drive the school is undertaking is an

effort to 'Create a Forest Learning Space for our School' - to improve the outdoor spaces for the students effectively - one parent, whose 13-year-old son has begun attending this year, said the issue is wider than that.

The outside space is "not fit for purpose" and there are children who need to be able to utilise the outdoors as a learning environment, but are unable to because it is not accessible enough.

The parent, who wishes to remain anonymous to keep her son's identity private, said her son came from a mainstream school but the gap between his academic abilities and those of his peers is "too great" for him to attend a mainstream secondary school.

She said the options for students in the county, who need the services of a special school, are "frightening".

"If he didn't get a place at Newcourt, I don't know what was going to happen," she said.

"I would have been in a panic situation and I would have been forced to send him to secondary school.

"He would have been overwhelmed and we would really have been struggling.

"He would have felt on the outside and excluded. Whereas in Newcourt School, you don't stand out as being 'different'. It's a very nourishing environment," she added.

"Newcourt school provides the right environment for children like my son to develop and grow as a person, not just academically.

"It's about the emotional well-being of the children first, then they go on and figure out the best learning path for the child. I don't know of any other school in the county that could cater for my child.

"He was anxious about going, but because they're so good at their job, they know exactly what they are doing.

"From day one, he was no longer anxious about going to school. From the moment he first came home - he wouldn't have friends, really, mainstream friends - he said: 'Mum, I'm

making friends"

The school is currently working with the NCSE and local politicians to try to access more permanent resources. The NCSE is to undertake a review on No-

vember 9.

The fundraising page for the school, which has a target of €10,000, can be found at: go-fundmeef/create-a-forest-school-for-our-school



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THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL HOUSING**

Wicklow County Council is seeking Expressions of Interest for the provision of Turnkey housing developments for Social Housing purposes.

Turnkey Developments, to be of interest to the Council, must be close to services within an urban settlement/ town/village, and within walking distance of shops, schools and local amenities. Housing Design and Construction Standards must at a minimum meet the requirements of all relevant statutory planning and building control requirements.

Wicklow County Council's preference is for mixed tenure. An 'Expressions of Interest' Application Form is available from the Housing Capital Projects Office, Wicklow County Council, County Buildings, Station Road, Wicklow or can be requested by phone (0404 20100 Housing Capital Projects) or email at AdvancedTurnkey@wicklowcoco.ie. Copies of the form are also available on the Council website at Wicklow.ie/Housing/HousingSupply/TurnkeyAcquisitions.

Submissions must be received not later than **4pm on Friday 2nd February 2024**. Wicklow County Council is not obliged to purchase any turnkey housing development submitted as part of this process.

Dated this 1st day of November, 2023.

Joe Lane
Director of Services
Housing & Corporate Estate

“HE WAS ANXIOUS ABOUT GOING, BUT FROM THE MOMENT HE FIRST CAME HOME HE SAID, ‘MUM, I’M MAKING FRIENDS’”