



September 2025

AsI Am Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters on Inclusive Education and Article 24 of the United Nations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

About AsI Am

AsI Am is Ireland's Autism Charity. Founded in 2014, AsI Am advocates for an inclusive society that is accessible, accepting and affirming for Autistic people and our wider community. We work to support the Autistic community and our families throughout the lifecycle to fully engage in Irish life and build the capacity of society to facilitate true inclusion. This is achieved through the programmes of support we offer and our advocacy work. AsI Am provides a range of programmes through our national and regional based activities and programmes.

As a Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO), AsI Am is Autistic led, informed by the experiences of Autistic people, and more than half of our staff and board are Autistic or have other differences or disabilities.

AsI Am's work focuses on advancing the rights of Autistic people across Irish society. We use a rights-based, Neuro-affirmative approach in all our work, supporting Autistic people across all supports within the organisation. AsI Am is also a founding member of the DPO Network - an alliance of five national DPOs who collectively advocate for the rights of

Disabled people and to advance the full implementation of the UNCRPD in Ireland, across all our laws and policies.

About Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental difference or disability which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others and how they experience the world around them. In keeping with our community's preferences, AslAm uses identity-first language ("i.e. Autistic person") throughout this submission to reflect that their experience of autism is a core part of their identity and central to their experience of living in Irish society. Further details about Autistic people's language preferences can be found in our Language Guide [here](#).

Introduction

AsIAM welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters on Inclusive Education and Ireland's obligations under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD).

This discussion comes at a critical moment considering the State's obligations around implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this discussion is a timely and welcome opportunity to ensure that disabled people, including Autistic people, play a central role in shaping reforms to the education system, particularly in light of the recently published *EPSEN Review*, the recently announced *National Convention on Education* and the *Autism Innovation Strategy*.

Despite some progress, Autistic children continue to face systemic barriers in accessing their constitutional right to an appropriate education. Many Autistic children experience long waiting lists for basic supports and face exclusionary practices such as reduced timetables, seclusion and restraint and ableist school Codes of Behaviour. These issues were documented in AsIAM's independent research [*What We Wish You Knew: A Rights-Based Analysis of School Codes of Behaviour*](#).

These practices undermine Autistic children's right to a primary education as identified under the constitution under Article 42, as well as Articles 28 and 29 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.¹ The Irish Government in 2018 ratified the UNCRPD, and in this affirmative action gave rise to the provision within Article 24 on inclusive education. In addition to the constitution and international conventions, there are strong legislative provisions in place under Section 7 of the *Education Act 1998*² and Section 2 of

¹ Articles 28 & 29, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (accessed 09 Sep 2025).

² Section 7, Education Act 1998, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/section/7/enacted/en/html> (accessed 09 Sep 2025).

the *Education of Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004*³ which purports the provision of accessing an appropriate school placement.

Notwithstanding these rights and provisions, the situation remains that many Autistic children are excluded from fully participating in the school system because of being Autistic or because of their support needs.

The EPSEN Act Review recognises the need for reform and sets out a pathway for a “*twin-track*” approach: ensuring that every child has a suitable school place with supports now, while building towards a future where children can attend their local school together, in accessible school environments and buildings, and have the supports and resources they need to thrive at school. This approach reflects the vision of Article 24 of the UNCRPD and General Comment 4 and to achieve this, AsIAM wishes to use this submission to identify the issues below which need to be address to make our education system more inclusive of Autistic students.

Inclusive School Environments

AsIAM has consistently called for a “*twin-track*” approach to realising the transition towards an inclusive education system in line with the UNCRPD and welcome the EPSEN Review’s recommendation to roll out this approach. This requires schools to be adequately resourced, universally designed, and staffed by professionals trained in neuro-affirmative practice in learning and support. This also means that every child has access to an appropriate school place that meets their needs. Achieving inclusive schools in practice means our schools must be resourced to meet the diverse needs of the Autistic community now and into the future. This requires universally designed classrooms, access to appropriate resources and staff within our schools being appropriately trained to meet the needs of their Autistic students. Students with communication, sensory, and support needs must have access to tailored accommodations such as Augmentative and Alternative

³ Section 2, Education of Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/section/2> (accessed 09 Sep 2025).

Communication, structured environments, visual supports, and teaching and assessment methods that are flexible to meet their ways of learning.

These focus points are identified in the recently published [review of the EPSEN Act](#) by the Department of Education. The review identified 51 recommendations which are aimed at developing this twin-track approach identified above to reforming the education system which aligns with Article 24 of the UNCRPD and General Comment 4.

AslAm welcomes this commitment from the Department, as we highlighted in our submission on the Review of the EPSEN Act:

*"...a transition towards an inclusive education system should occur in incremental stages, but with real momentum and a clear policy direction. A twin-track approach is needed: increasing investment to ensure that every person has a school place with supports which meet their needs presently, while also building longer-term reforms which facilitate an inclusive education system that every child can access."*⁴

This means every Autistic child must have a suitable school place that meets their needs now - whether in a mainstream school, autism class, or special school. In parallel, the system must build towards a future where all students can access their local school with their peers. As we highlighted in our *Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment*, this supported through Universal Design for Learning across curriculums, environments and pedagogies, rights-based training for teachers and school staff, and structural reforms aligned with Article 24 of the UNCRPD and General Comment 4.⁵

⁴ AslAm, Submission to the Department of Education on Proposed Reforms on the Education of Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, [65e7332acda93bda76f23607_AslAm-submission-on-the-EPSEN-Act-Reforms.pdf](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

⁵ AslAm, 'Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on their Public Consultations on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications in Arts Education; Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in the Primary Language Curriculum; Social and Environmental Education (SEE); Science, Technology and Engineering Education (STE); and Wellbeing,' [667d77c622cf29a83b4f531d_AslAm Submission to the NCCA on the Primary Curriculum Framework.pdf](#) (accessed 09 Sep 2025).

AslAm's vision for an inclusive education system is for children to go to school together, for schools to see the value of inclusion and participation and to be accessible, flexible, and inclusive to every child in the community. To realise this vision, schools should also have the resources, training, staffing and environments they need to create this learning environment. This includes the use of Universal Design for learning and blended learning to address barriers to education and support all children to go to their local schools in their community.

In line with General Comment 4⁶, Neurodivergent, Autistic and Disabled students with the following differences should have access to the following supports⁷:

- Students with communication differences, including non-speaking students and gestalt communicators, should have the opportunity to learn and communicate through the forms of communication most intuitive to them. This includes Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), sign language, tablets or computers with text-to-speech, Assistive Technology and other communication supports;
- Students with social interaction or sensory processing differences should have a structured learning or classroom environment with accommodations around classroom organisation and group work;
- Students with high support needs should have access to "concrete, observable/visual and easy-read teaching and learning materials within a safe, quiet and structured learning environment, targeting capacities that will best prepare students for independent living and vocational contexts. States parties should invest

⁶ General Comment 4 – Article 24, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, p. 12. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive> (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

⁷ AslAm, Submission to the Department of Education on Proposed Reforms on the Education of Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, [65e7332acda93bda76f23607_AslAm-submission-on-the-EPSEN-Act-Reforms.pdf](https://www.epson.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/65e7332acda93bda76f23607_AslAm-submission-on-the-EPSEN-Act-Reforms.pdf) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

in inclusive interactive classrooms using alternative instructional strategies and assessment methods.”⁸

Whilst we welcome recent policy developments such as the EPSEN Act Review, we continue to hear from our community that the vision of inclusive education remains far from reality in many schools. Autistic students describe feeling overwhelmed and dysregulated in classrooms, lacking consistent support, being misunderstood by teachers, and being labelled ‘bold’ or ‘disruptive’ simply for being their Autistic selves or needing to meet their support needs.

Delivering on the promise of inclusive education cannot be delayed, and no Autistic child should be left behind or stigmatised for being themselves. Autistic children cannot wait years for the education they deserve. The Department of Education must invest now in the necessary resources, so that families are not left fighting for school places and vital supports or stigmatised for wanting their Autistic child to have the education they deserve. Alongside resourcing, a cultural shift is required across the education system and in school communities across Ireland - one that recognises and celebrates Autistic strengths and differences, promotes inclusive school cultures, and creates schools where every child is welcomed, feels like they belong, and is supported to thrive and be included in their community.

Lived Experience Advocacy

A key part of building a truly inclusive education system is ensure Autistic students have opportunities to have their voice heard and to actively participate in shaping policies about their education. Article 4(3) of the UNCRPD requires States to involve Disabled people in all

⁸ General Comment 4 – Article 24, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, p. 12. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive> (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

decisions affecting their lives,⁹ whilst Article 7 of the UNCRPD States *"shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children"*, and for the best interests of the child to be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting their lives.¹⁰

Our engagement with Autistic children and their experiences at school highlight that their experiences are often not believed, and that they often felt excluded at school and from decision-making processes. Autistic children and young people reported having to mask to fit in at school, and that their voices and interests were not represented or supported by schools. This has left Autistic students feeling isolated, unsafe to be fully themselves and reluctant to disclose their support needs. Ensuring that Autistic students' perspectives are included is vital to centring lived experience in education policy and practice. AsIAM calls for accessible consultation and engagement processes that actively involve Autistic students in co-producing curricula, developing school guidance frameworks, designing inclusive environments and policies, and shaping future reforms, including to the EPSEN Act.

Peer Awareness Programmes

Autistic students have highlighted that peer awareness is central to shaping their school experiences and to feeling accepted and included. However, Autistic students have shared experiences where they have been bullied at school, experienced isolation and loneliness at school, and where they have been treated differently by teachers and peers for feeling overwhelmed or dysregulated at school. Evidence shows that when peers adopt a neuro-affirmative understanding of autism, this reduces feelings of shame and stigma that Autistic students experience and supports Autistic students to fully participate as they are.

⁹ Article 4(3), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-4-general-obligations.html> (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹⁰ Article 7, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-7-children-with-disabilities> (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

Programmes should be Autistic-led or co-designed with Autistic people, focus on promoting acceptance and active participation rather than trying to fix Autistic ways of being. This should also create school cultures that value difference and diversity and reduce the need for school codes of behaviour which disproportionately affects Autistic students. The AslAm Autism Friendly Schools Programme and our Primary and Secondary Schools Workshops are practical example of how this can be achieved, helping schools to create learning environments that better support Autistic students while fostering a culture of inclusion across the whole school community.

Sensory-Friendly Classrooms

Many Autistic students tell us that they find their school environment, particularly classrooms, to be overwhelming or distressing due to large class sizes, noise, smells and lack of predictability and supports. In two research reports commissioned by AslAm, students report being disciplined for trying to regulate themselves, seen as “*bold*” or “*disruptive*” when feeling distressed at school, told to control or hide their Autistic traits or refused accommodation to support their sensory needs.

These findings were reinforced by the independent study [Exploring the School Experiences of Autistic Children and Young People](#), which documented the lived experience of Autistic students in Irish schools. Collectively, this evidence shows that we remain far from achieving an inclusive education system that is genuinely supportive of, and respectful towards, Autistic students’ sensory and communication needs.

Building sensory-friendly classrooms is essential to creating environments that support Autistic students’ learning and wellbeing. This includes access to quiet spaces, sensory tools, accessible classroom design, predictable timetables and routines, and policies that respect students’ communication and sensory processing needs. These measures should be viewed as core elements of wider school reform to make education genuinely inclusive.

In-School Therapies

To create an inclusive education system, key support such as in-school therapy services must be provided. In-school therapeutic services can act as a vital support for Autistic students to access their right to an education on an equal basis with their peers. Without them, many students are left without the support they need to fully participate in school, leading to poorer wellbeing, learning outcomes, and expectations for the future.

Despite the announcement of an In-School Therapy Service pilot, there has been little evidence of its implementation in practice. In our day-to-day work supporting Autistic people and families, many Autistic children have no access to timely, accessible supports, which undermines their wellbeing, their capacity to learn and thrive in school, and to fully participating in the education system.

The In-School Therapy Service must be expanded across the entire education system to ensure all students have the supports they need to access and thrive in education. Limiting therapists to special schools risks entrenching a two-tier system, where some children receive comprehensive support while others are left without. This approach undermines the principle of inclusive education. To uphold children's rights under the UNCPRD, all students - regardless of school setting - must have timely access to the therapeutic supports necessary to participate fully in the curriculum and school life.

Embedding therapies in schools - such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, psychological support, and access to assistive technology - should be seen as core educational supports necessary for all students, including Autistic students, to be included and to fully participate at school.

Individualised Learning Supports

An inclusive education system, as envisioned under Article 24 UNCPRD, and General Comment 4 must focus on the needs of the individual. Currently, many Autistic students who attend mainstream school rely on support from a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) or

from a Special Education Teacher (SET). Although the number of SNAs and SETs have increased in recent years, these are insufficient to fully meet the demand for support from communities, including Autistic children, who need these supports to fully engage and participate at school. Our most recent *Same Chance Report* highlighted that 24% of respondents, almost one in four families, reported that their child's access to SET hours was inadequate.¹¹

The failure to fully commence key provisions of the EPSEN Act – including statutory Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or Student Support Plans and access to timely support – leaves Autistic students in a perilous position, whereby they are dependent on the discretion agencies or the school management body for the supports they need.

- Rights-based, with statutory backing and enforceability.
- Strengths-focused, recognising and building on Autistic students' skills, interests, differences and support needs.
- Continuous across transitions, following students as they move from early years through primary, post-primary, and into further or higher education.

This continuity is vital to avoid distress, dysregulation, and to ensure long-term educational and developmental outcomes and overall wellbeing. The need for coherent, individualised pathways is also reflected in commitments under the *Autism Innovation Strategy* and the *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People*.

Codes of Behaviour

Codes of Behaviour are inherently biased against Autistic students. There is direct evidence to support this claim. AsIAm's independent report "*What We Wish You Knew: A Rights-Based Analysis of School Codes of Behaviour*" shone a spotlight on how many

¹¹ AsIAm, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/67e572276f39ff1d6d830135_Version%203%20Digital%20Full%20AsIAm%20Same%20Chance%20Report.pdf (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

Autistic students found that current school disciplinary frameworks like codes of behaviour to be a deeply unfair practice that negatively impacted their school experiences. *This Report* found that none of the 40 codes independently analysed were rights-compliant in terms of their language and application. Many, if not all of these codes perpetuated ableist attitudes towards autism, excluded Autistic students' perspectives from their design. Instead of supporting Autistic students inclusion and participation at school, these codes often penalised Autistic traits such as stimming, avoiding eye contact, or sensory regulation. Contrary to the spirit of the UNCRPD, school codes reinforced stigma and exclusion for many Autistic students.

To align with UNCRPD obligations, codes of behaviour must be co-produced with students, and be grounded in reasonable accommodations, and move away from punitive reward–sanction models and towards restorative, rights-based approaches. They must also remove ableist and behaviourist language and providing schools with capacity-building and guidance is essential to ensure codes of behaviour promote belonging and equality rather than exclusion.

The ongoing review of the framework [*"Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools"*](#) is a vital opportunity to embed these reforms and ensure that Autistic students are actively involved in co-producing these guidelines. This process must place Autistic voice at its centre and ensure that the new framework reflects the spirit and principles of the UNCRPD.

Reduced Timetables

Irish schools regularly place Autistic children and Disabled children on reduced timetables. In a recently published report by the Department of Education for the school year

2023/2024, data shows there was a 20% increase in the use of reduced timetables within our schooling system. In addition to this, an Inclusion Ireland report found that approximately one in four children with an intellectual or developmental disability had been placed on reduced timetables lasting more than 20 days for half of these children. This is despite guidelines from the Department of Education specifying the use of such practices should only occur in circumstances where it may be "*part of a transition or reintegration intervention, based on the needs of the individual students*"¹² and should not be used as a sanction.

A key reason schools may place Autistic children on a reduced timetable is that as a consequence or feeling upset, distressed or dysregulated by their needs not being met, the child may display 'challenging behaviour' or may be seen as being too 'bold' or 'disruptive' – a stigmatising label for many Autistic and Disabled children with disabilities which has a wider negative impact on their school experiences.¹³

What is often labelled as 'challenging behaviour' is, in reality, a response to barriers within the classroom and wider school environment, lack of accessibility, and inadequate support. When schools rely on reduced timetables instead of addressing these systemic issues, they reinforce exclusion rather than inclusion. A school system that is resource-light and dependent on disciplinary measures like reduced timetables cannot claim to embody inclusive practice.

Seclusion and restraint

Seclusion and restraint also continue to be used in Irish schools as a response to 'challenging behaviour' or as a disciplinary measure. Autistic children report being locked in

¹² Department of Education, 'The Use of Reduced School days Guidelines for schools on recording and notification of the use of Reduced School days' p.2, <https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-Use-of-Reduced-School-days.pdf> (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹³ AsIAm, 'What We Wish You Knew A rights-based analysis of school codes of behaviour in Ireland', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/67063a76a2b0a7503172f463_Code%20of%20Behaviours%20What%20We%20Wish%20You%20Knew%20Booklet%20digital.pdf (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

rooms, forcibly removed from spaces, or physically restrained by staff. These practices directly violate children's rights to education, bodily integrity, liberty, security, and non-discrimination.

In 2024, the Department of Education published Guidelines on the use of restraint and seclusion in Irish schools, titled '*Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations Guidelines for Schools in Supporting Students*'. The Guidelines cover how practices like seclusion and restraint are used in schools from September 2025. These Guidelines state that schools should focus on de-escalation and prevention and prohibits schools from using seclusion. Schools will now have to report incidents where physical restraint is used on students to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

However, AslAm and other organisations highlight significant concerns regarding this. The current reporting mechanism for restraint in schools does not comply with the Children First legislation. While schools must report incidents to the NCSE, this body has no formal powers of investigation, and there is no clear referral pathway to Tusla. The Department claims the Children First guidelines apply but fails to clarify how. Key safeguarding concerns raised by organisations were not addressed. The system allows schools to self-report without independent oversight, lacks mandatory training, parental consent, or inspection requirements, and falls short of safeguarding standards used in other settings like prisons, social care and mental health settings. We call on the Department of Education to strengthen the Guidelines on seclusion and restraint to meet child protection and human rights standards by:

- Establishing an independent oversight and investigation mechanism.
- Embedding mandatory, rights-based training for all school staff.
- Creating a formal referral pathway to Tusla, with statutory oversight powers.
- Requiring schools to maintain rights-based restraint and behaviour policies, and to undergo regular inspections.

AslAm, alongside our colleagues in Inclusion Ireland, are currently leading a campaign to progress this issue, including preparing a complaint for the relevant UN institutions.

Transition Planning

Transitions between school settings are key points where Autistic students are particularly likely to experience anxiety or distress. A recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Report highlighted that curriculum support in special schools lacked consistency and continuity between Junior and Senior Cycles, and that this was identified where students often lost support. The Report highlighted *“notable challenges in providing an appropriate and challenging curriculum for young adults in special schools that point to significant policy issues around school organisation and design, classification of special schools as primary schools, teacher allocation, funding, insurance and programme/curricular provision and guidance.”*¹⁴

The Report also highlighted that the lack of a standardised transition policy between Junior and Senior Cycle means that schools must develop their own policies, which meant that schools were cautious in determining whether a student was “ready” to make the transition to post-school life.¹⁵ The Report also highlighted that students with additional educational support needs often leave school less prepared and less confident in their decision-making. This is further compounded by factors such as poverty, socioeconomic discrimination, and restricted access to services. Autistic students in special schools or autism classes are particularly affected by lowered expectations from staff and peers.¹⁶

Across mainstream and special schools, the importance of high expectations for all students is clear and young adults across the study pointed to SEN (Special Education

¹⁴ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs', p. 19, [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹⁵ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs' [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹⁶ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs' [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

Needs) labels unfairly affecting the expectations others had of them.¹⁷ It is vital to address these low expectations at a whole school level through more inclusive and individualised support strategies and curriculum approaches that accommodate diverse student needs. Schools must develop flexible transition plans, ensure continuity of provision across settings, and actively promote high ambitions for all students to reach their full potential.

The Report also found that including students' own voices is crucial when facilitating their post-school planning, decision-making and longer-term pathways. In this context, the results highlight a need for a stronger focus on self-determination skills development at school. It is notable that a third of students felt their school 'did not help' develop an interest in learning.¹⁸ Independent learning, self-determination, and broader life skills must be given far greater priority within Senior Cycle redevelopment and across second-level education more broadly.

Support for young people with additional needs must be adequate, individualised, and responsive to their wishes. Students consistently value small group or one-to-one support, express frustration at the over-reliance on special class provision, and highlight the lack of access to mental health supports, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and socio-emotional supports as they progress through school.¹⁹

Transition planning must therefore be grounded in Article 7 of the UNCRC, ensuring that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration, that student voice and ambition are at the centre of planning, and that supports are delivered as enforceable rights rather than discretionary provisions.

¹⁷ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs' [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹⁸ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs' [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

¹⁹ Economic and Social Research Institute, 'Paths, tracks, gaps and cliffs: the post-school transitions of students with special educational needs' [Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students](#) (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

Barriers to Participation

Autistic students continue to face systemic exclusion from full participation in the education system through codes of behaviour, suspensions, expulsions, reduced timetables, and a lack of available school places.

The EPSEN Act still uses language that frames Autistic students as having “special needs” rather than recognising their equal right to access an inclusive education. This framing reinforces segregation and exclusion, places low expectations on students, and sustains discriminatory practices across the system. It also assumes that Autistic students lack the capacity to fully engage in education, which is both inaccurate and harmful.

To move towards true inclusion, reforms must:

- Embed a rights-based understanding of disability, in line with the UNCRPD;
- Ensure that reasonable accommodations are standard practice across all schools;
- Outlaw exclusionary practices such as unnecessary suspensions, restrictive codes of behaviour, reduced timetables used as sanctions, and the systemic denial of school places.

Every child must be guaranteed the right to attend their local school, with access to the supports they require to participate and thrive, and free from discrimination on the basis of being Autistic.

Mental Health Supports

Year after year, AslAm's *Same Chance Report* has highlighted the significant barriers Autistic people face in accessing mental health supports.²⁰ For Autistic students, these barriers are particularly acute: many report persistent experiences of anxiety, distress, loneliness, and burnout in school.

Despite this, mental health is often deprioritised in favour of academic outcomes. Guidance counsellors frequently report limited knowledge of autism, leaving many students without meaningful or appropriate support.

A whole-school approach to wellbeing is urgently required. This must include:

- Access to neuro-affirmative counselling, provided by professionals trained in autism and trauma-informed practice.
- Safe spaces for students to regulate and recover from the sensory impact of school.
- Predictable routines and environments that reduce stress and uncertainty;
- Embedding mental health and wellbeing as a core part of education, not a separate or optional add-on.

At present, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is failing to meet demand. Long waiting times and limited availability leave Autistic students without critical supports. Without adequate wrap-around supports, schools cannot claim to be inclusive.

A truly inclusive education system can only thrive if mental health and wellbeing are placed on an equal footing with academic achievement, with sufficient resources and accountability to ensure every Autistic student has access to the supports they need.

Staff Autism Training

²⁰ AslAm, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/67e572276f39ff1d6d830135_Version%203%20Digital%20Full%20AslAm%20Same%20Chance%20Report.pdf (accessed 08 Sep 2025).

A major barrier to inclusion is the lack of autism-specific training for school staff, or the reliance on deficit-based approaches that frame autism as a problem to be managed, rather than as a difference to be supported and celebrated. Guidance counsellors, teachers, and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) often report uncertainty in how to best support Autistic students in practice.

To create more inclusive schools for our community, training promoting autism understanding and acceptance must be mandatory, continuous, and grounded in neuro-affirmative practice. Crucially, it should be co-produced with Autistic people, ensuring that their lived experience informs best practices in promoting understanding and acceptance.

Training should cover:

- Sensory regulation and the impact of sensory environments on learning;
- [Monotropism](#) and different learning styles;
- The [Double Empathy Problem](#) and strategies to improve mutual understanding;
- The distinct needs of Autistic girls, non-binary and LGBTQ+ students, who are often overlooked in current training;
- How to support Autistic students using reasonable accommodations as standard practice;
- Use of inclusive communication methods, including Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), Easy-to-Read, visual supports, and assistive technology.

Embedding this training across the teachers, support staff and the wider school community would ensure schools are not only more confident in supporting Autistic students but also more proactively realise inclusive, rights-based pedagogies and practices in including Autistic children.

Achieving an Inclusive Education System

AsIAM calls for Ireland to fully align with the UNCRPD by:

- Fully commencing and updating the EPSEN Act to ensure that Autistic children have a right to an appropriate school place, which is fully resourced to meet their needs.
- Regulating and phasing out exclusionary practices within our schooling system.
- Ensuring access to individualised supports, such as in-school therapies.
- Embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL), sensory-friendly classrooms and school buildings, and peer awareness programmes across the education system.
- Ensuring that students have the right to inclusive transition planning and the necessary supports to facilitate this.
- Providing mandatory, neuro-affirmative autism training for all school staff.
- Incorporating mental health supports across the education system.

Recommendations

In light of our findings and consistent with AsIAM's submissions to the EPSEN Review, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the UN CRPD Committee List of Issues, we call on Government and the Department of Education to take the following actions to make our education system more inclusive of our community and build a vision of inclusive education that supports all students:

Law and Policy Reform

- Develop, with a view to implement, an Inclusive Education Strategy, aligned with Article 24 UNCRPD and General Comment 4, and based on the findings and recommendations of the [EPSEN Review](#) and the NCSE Policy Advice [An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society](#). Ensure Autistic people and Disabled people, families, and DPOs are actively involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the Strategy and engagement processes are fully accessible to our community.

- Modernise and fully commence the EPSEN Act, embedding a rights-based definition of inclusive education consistent with Article 24 UNCRPD and General Comment No. 4.
- Enshrine statutory rights to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) / Student Support Plans with clear timelines, legally enforceable rights, and with the voice of students and families at the centre of the process.
- Ensure Codes of Behaviour are co-produced with students, rights-compliant, and embed reasonable accommodations, moving away from punitive frameworks that penalise Autistic traits or ways of learning.

Access to Supports

- Guarantee statutory access to in-school therapies (speech and language, occupational therapy, psychology, and assistive technology) through multi-disciplinary teams embedded in or linked to schools.
- Expand and resource the network of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), ensuring adequate supply and mandatory neuro-affirmative training for all staff within the school community.
- Ensure equity of access by addressing the postcode lottery in school places, and commit to reducing reliance on segregated autism classes and special schools over time.

Inclusive School Environments

- Embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) across curriculum and assessment frameworks, as highlighted in our NCCA submission, to make subjects, environments, and class materials accessible and intuitive to Autistic students.
- Introduce peer awareness and acceptance programmes nationwide, co-designed with Autistic people, to reduce stigma, bullying, and social isolation.
- Make all classrooms sensory-friendly, ensuring access to quiet spaces, sensory breaks, and flexible seating arrangements as reasonable accommodations.

Safeguarding and Protection

- End the use of seclusion and restraint in schools, replacing it with trauma-informed, rights-based approaches. Strengthen 2024 Guidelines by establishing independent oversight, mandatory reporting pathways to Tusla, and mandatory staff training in de-escalation.
- Prohibit misuse of reduced timetables as a disciplinary measure in line with Article 7 CRPD.

Student Voice and Transitions

- Ensure student voice is central to all decision-making processes within the education system, from codes of behaviour to curriculum design and transition planning, in compliance with Article 7 CRPD.
- Establish a statutory national framework for transition planning, beginning in early secondary school and continuing into post-school pathways (higher education, training, apprenticeships, employment).
- Prioritise self-determination skills (independent learning, decision-making, life skills) within the Senior Cycle redevelopment and broader second-level provision.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Invest in school-based mental health supports, including access to counselling, safe spaces, and staff trained in neuro-affirmative practice.
- Adopt a whole-school wellbeing approach that integrates mental health into the fabric of education, not as an optional add-on.