



THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Report of the Task Group on Autism



MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

As Minister for Education, one of my key priorities is special education. I believe strongly that all children should have the opportunity to achieve to their full potential, and that how we provide for the needs of those children who need extra help is a measure against which our education system should be judged. Within special education, I am continually impressed and heartened by the wealth of dedication, love, imagination and skill which teachers bring, day and daily, to their work with children, both in special schools and units and in mainstream classes. I believe that this expertise needs to be shared more widely within education; but also there is much more which needs to be done.

Research shows that autism and dyslexia are under-reported and under-developed aspects of special needs. These are issues which are of concern throughout Ireland. When the North-South Ministerial Council was established, special education was an immediate priority for both our Education Departments, and we decided that autism and dyslexia should be the areas for first attention. At the same time, parallel Task Groups were established in these areas here and in the South, and we were careful to ensure that membership of both groups overlapped so that experience and information could be shared to the benefit of all.

The North's Task Group on Autism was led by Mr Martin Clarke, Principal Educational Psychologist of the Belfast Education and Library Board, and he and his colleagues on the Group have produced a major and very comprehensive Report. I am particularly grateful to him personally, as well as to his colleagues, for giving so generously of their time and expertise. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable contributions of all those who offered their insights and expertise to the Group in its work; and also to express my thanks to the Belfast Education and Library Board for allowing Mr Clarke the time and administrative support to lead the Group and compile this Report.



It presents very real challenges for all of us in education, particularly in relation to under-diagnosis, and under-provision in the early years. It also highlights a number of areas where we need to take action, in terms of training for classroom teachers in recognising where a child has, or may have, a difficulty on the autistic spectrum; in understanding what this may mean in terms of how the child will behave, interact and learn; in putting in place measures to address the child's needs; in working with parents to ensure a consistent approach between school and home - and, most importantly, to ensure that the obstacles to learning presented by the autism are minimised. These challenges are life-long: for Further and Higher Education, for employers and for society, because autism is not a condition which disappears with maturity.

I very much hope that this Report will serve to inform our thinking, and to act as a catalyst to help us all in the education system reassess and improve what we do. I commend it to you and look forward to your response.

Martin Mc Guinness

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Minister for Education

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