Submission on

The Role of the Special Needs Assistant

On behalf of the

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education

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1. Introduction and context for this submission

The core purpose of NABMSE is to unite Boards of Management in Special Education in the Republic by providing a means for the expression of their individual and collective experience on matters affecting the education of children with special needs. Our core objectives are:

- **To promote the highest standard of education for persons with special needs.**
- **To achieve adequate deployment of resources to support education for persons with special needs.**
- **To encourage and facilitate communication and co-operation between persons engaged in the education of persons with special needs.**
- **To arrange or assist in arranging and providing conferences, discussions and meetings on subjects of general or special interest in the field of management in special education.**
- **To promote the study of best practices with regard to their impact on enhancing the abilities of persons with special needs.**

NABMSE has 160 school members (Special and Mainstream schools) across the Republic catering for children across the full spectrum of special needs. Our sector has a very large number of SNAs working within our schools and therefore has a significant interest in any review or proposed development of the role.
NABMSE is delighted to contribute to the consultation and to underline the significance of these issues and in preparation for this submission, NABMSE carried out a consultation of our membership. An in-depth consultation meeting was held in mid-November of our members across the country. This session proved invaluable in, first of all, highlighting the core issues in relation to the role of the SNA but also in the most constructive approach that members took to crafting practical, realistic and innovative proposals around key concerns. Careful planning went into devising the format of the consultation to allow members contribute in the most comprehensive and positive manner possible.

2. Key Areas for Review of the SNA Role

2.1 Clarity of Role

There was almost unanimous agreement around the weakness of the current role description in the view of members. Much more work is required to define in a professional manner the core aspects of the role of the SNA and to involve all the stakeholders in this review. Members wanted the role to reflect the core aspect of CARE in the duties of the SNA while recognising the many forms this care role may take in the day-to-day duties of the SNA as they support the leading educational role of the teacher. The research cited by the NCSE in their submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (9th October 2013) was seen as significant. It pointed out that evolving to a more educational role for the SNA may in fact impede optimum educational outcomes for the student. Therefore it is the view that a primarily care role be maintained and developed while recognising the necessary support contribution that the SNA has under the leadership and guidance of the teacher as the primary educational presence. We note that this recommendation echoes a similar recommendation in the Value for Money Review of the Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme June 2011:
'The [SNA] Scheme needs to be restated to ensure an efficient allocation of SNA resources and clarify the ‘care’ nature of the SNA role for parents, schools and professionals' (Executive Summary, p.11) – this same report goes on to say:

‘SNAs are adopting a pedagogical role, contrary to best practice and the stated purpose of the Scheme.' (Executive Summary, p.14)

Much more work is required in this review of the role to examine issues such as use of the 72 hours; duties that the SNA can and cannot be concerned with; the implications for oversight by management of SNAs; provision of best practice guidelines and templates for common areas of SNA responsibility etc. Members recognised the differences in the operation of the SNA role in various types of schools and this fact would need to be considered in the context of any review.

### 2.2 Training

The membership clearly values the role of the SNA in their schools and wish for them to be offered relevant training across a range of specialisations. This improved access to ongoing training and development would be of benefit to the students in their care as well as developing the SNA in their role. Furthermore there is support for career and job security for SNAs as they progress and as a means to have their experience and expertise recognised. It is essential that this necessary development of the role be always in the context of needs of the students for which this service has been established. Therefore a multi layered process is required to effectively review this key role in our schools to ensure it is driven by the needs of students in the context of the schools and the resources available.

It was also felt that easier access to training could be facilitated by the Department of Education and Skills than is currently the experience of SNAs. The members recognised the DES’s approved and funded standard introductory training programmes provided by various colleges across the country and the in depth follow up programme of training provided. Again appropriate consultation
with school leaders, Boards of Management, parents and relevant representative bodies is required to ensure a student focused approach to training is adopted. This point is also echoed in the Value for Money report on the SNA Scheme cited above:

‘The Department should consider how best to address the training needs and training programmes provided to SNAs.’ (Executive Summary, p.17)

Developments in this area will also lead to an assessment of the criteria of entry to the SNA service. Many members felt it is opportune to review the basic requirements for SNAs. They recognise that many SNAs have qualifications and experience in excess of the basic requirements as laid down by the Department. Any review of the role may need to take into account the continuous development of SNAs appropriate to their role as highlighted above but this should not take precedence over the needs of the students and also the primary human qualities at the heart of the contribution of the SNA.

2.3 Implications for Management

In the context of deeply valuing the contribution of SNAs, it is clear that there is a very significant knock on effect for school leaders managing SNAs. In many special schools it is the case that there are many more SNAs than teachers. This has led to a very substantial increase in the day-to-day management role of the principal in particular with no extra resources for this work. This work involves timetabling, HR, administration, review, reporting and liaising with unions etc. It also involves increased responsibilities for Boards of Management as they carry out their oversight role for the school. In this context recognition of this increased workload is required in any review of the role of the SNA – in particular the provision of adequate administrative support and professional development for school principals as they manage the ever increasing demands placed upon them.
2.4 Liaison with SNA Representatives

The effective working of the partnership with stakeholders and their representatives has always been a key pillar in the work of NABMSE members. This is no less true in the interaction with SNA representatives. NABMSE would welcome a deeper engagement of management and unions with the involvement of the Department of Education and Skills in the clarification of the respective roles and responsibilities in relation to the operation of the SNA role in our schools. Without such a high level and quality engagement it is the fear of the membership that unhelpful practices will develop in this regard. Such a collaborative review that hears the voices of SNAs, teachers, management and others will lead to a further development of the proper recognition of the SNA role in our schools.

3. Summary of Recommendations to the Oireachtas Committee

3.1 Review of Role – that a comprehensive review of the role be undertaken in particular around the effective application of the core CARE role of the SNA.

3.2 Appreciation of Role in different sectors – an examination of the differing needs for the SNA role in various school types

3.3 Training – that improved training opportunities for training be offered to SNAs in a structured framework with a more effective and focused role for the Department of Education and Skills.

3.4 Criteria of Entry – that a review of the entry criteria for the SNA scheme be undertaken to recognise the evolving nature and contribution of the role.

3.5 Management – a review of the responsibilities of school management in relation to the SNA scheme be undertaken in order to provide the appropriate support and resources for the effective operation of the scheme.

3.6 Stakeholders – that a high-level review of the role incorporate the outlining of the appropriate responsibilities of all concerned. That this review (linked to recommendation 3.1) involve a multi-party consultation.
4. Conclusion

NABMSE is delighted to contribute to the debate initiated by the Oireachtas Committee on this vital role in our schools. Our members are committed to supporting and developing the role of the SNA in a manner that respects and values the many people who take on this key role. We are also committed to ensuring that the scheme is consistently focused on the needs of our pupils so that their needs are at all times paramount.

Finally, we thank all those who have assisted in authoring this submission and in particular those who partook in the consultation process with such generosity – a generosity that echoes the extraordinary commitment evidenced across our country in the care and education of our children with special needs.

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