

NASUWT NI MEMBERS SPECIAL SCHOOL SURVEY 2023-2024

Findings and recommendations



Abstract:

Special schools serve a vital role in providing education and support to students with complex needs. These students require specialised support from teachers and wider staff to help them reach their full potential.

The funding for special schools in Northern Ireland has not been forthcoming and the situation has been deteriorating amidst austerity policies since 2010.

Delma Boggs NEM NASUWT NI

Executive summary report: Impact of Financial and Service Cuts on Special Schools in Northern Ireland

Special schools serve a vital role in providing education and support to students with complex needs. These students require specialised support from teachers and wider staff to help them reach their full potential. Special schools are designed to provide this support in a safe, nurturing environment that provides a high staff-to-pupil ratio.

The Education Authority in Northern Ireland has stated that more than £80 million in funding is urgently needed to significantly increase the number of special school places in Belfast. This comes as demand has skyrocketed, with a 40% rise in special school pupil numbers in the city over the past decade.

At the time the survey was carried out, the Education Authority had planned to open a brand new special school in Belfast by 2024 to address this shortage of places and the ever-increasing numbers in special schools, by implementing the use of satellite facilities of other special schools and units in mainstream schools.

The issue has reached a crisis point, with currently only ten special schools in the Belfast area and 39 across Northern Ireland to serve over 7,100 pupils, many with complex special educational needs (SEN).

The Education Authority's call for £80m+ highlights the significant investment required to provide adequate access to special school education for the rapidly growing number of children across Belfast being assessed as requiring this level of specialised provision.

Surveying NASUWT NI members in special schools:

To gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by special schools and the quality of education they provide, a 30-question survey was developed and issued by the NASUWT NI SEN Team to special school teachers in Northern Ireland.

The survey was administered online to all NASUWT NI members who were special school teachers in Northern Ireland.

A total of 224 teachers completed the survey, providing a representative sample of the special school teaching community in Northern Ireland.

Key Findings:

- **Reduced access to Specialised Support:**
Financial cuts have forced special schools to reduce services, e.g. speech therapy, physiotherapy, and counselling.
This limits critical support for students with complex needs.
- **Increased Class Sizes and Reduced Staffing:**
Budget cuts have led to larger class sizes.
Fewer staff members make it difficult to provide individualised attention to students.
There is a quick turnover in staff.
Many staff do not have permanent contracts.
- **Reduced Extracurricular Activities:**
Funding cuts threaten extracurricular and socialisation opportunities.
Limits skill-building outside the classroom.
- **Increased Burden on Families:**
When schools cannot provide adequate support, more responsibility falls on families.
Challenging for families already caring for children with complex needs.
- **Negative Impact on Staff Morale:**
Reduced staffing, increased workload, and stressful environments can lower teacher/staff morale and negatively affect student care/education.
- **Reporting System of Incidents:**
There is a system in place to report verbal and physical abuse, but it is not consistently in use.

Conclusion:

The financial and service cuts to special schools in Northern Ireland are having a range of negative impacts on staff members:

The financial and service cuts to special schools in Northern Ireland are having wide-ranging negative impacts on students, families and staff.

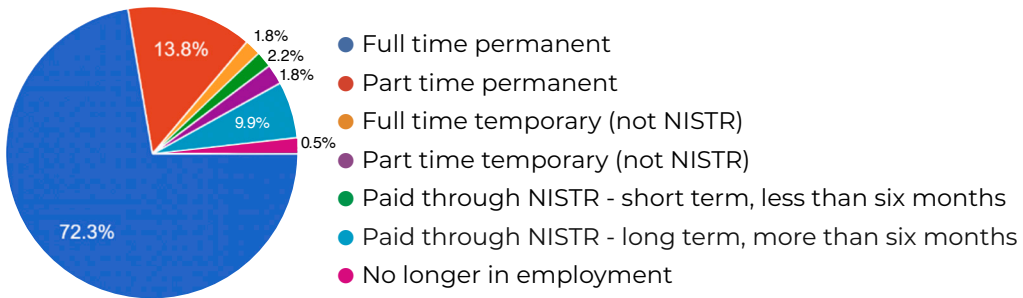
This jeopardises access to specialised education and care for students with complex needs. Solutions must be found to ensure these schools receive adequate resources and funding to support this vulnerable population.

Negative impact on staff morale: financial and service cuts can lead to reduced staffing levels, increased workload and a more stressful work environment for teachers and staff members. This can lead to lower morale and higher levels of stress, which can negatively impact on the quality of care and education provided to students and on the duty of care bestowed on staff, as everyone feels the pressure within a school. This pressure is felt even more when the behaviour of pupils is a factor in the classroom.

Special School Survey Results:

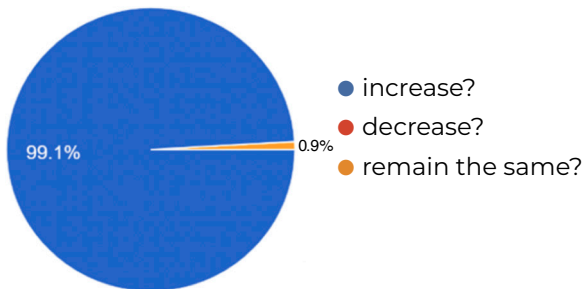
1. What type of employment contract do you have?

224 responses



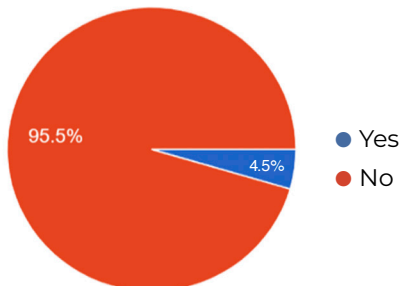
2. Have you seen the numbers of students with extremely challenging and highly complex needs in your special school...

224 responses



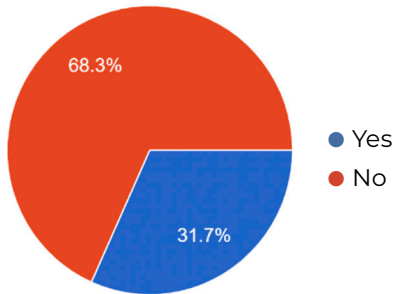
3. Has the amount of additional specialist support available for the pupils in this category matched the additional numbers of those students?

222 responses



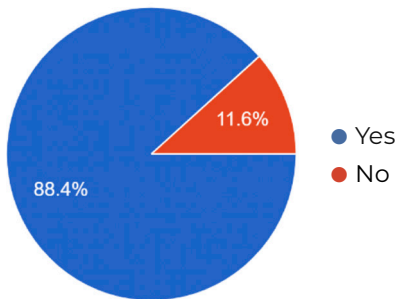
4. Is the Continued Professional Development provided to you adequate to meet the challenges of working in a special school?

224 responses



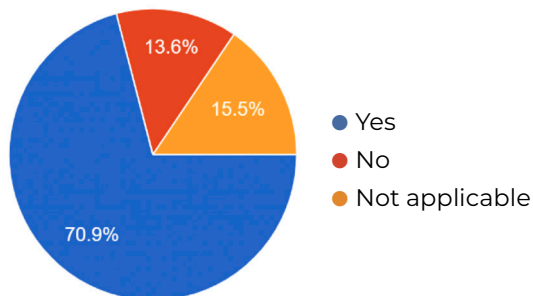
5a. Has space within your school which was previously designed for other purposes been redesignated as a teaching space?

224 responses



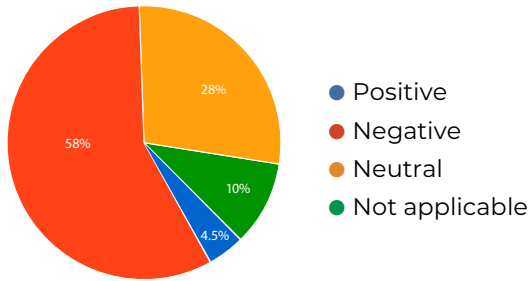
5b. If you answered yes to question 5a, has the repurposing of space affected the breadth of learning experiences for pupils in your school?

220 responses



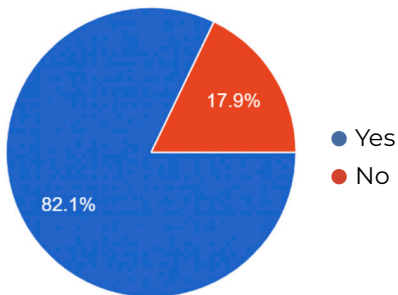
6. How would you categorise the effect that any repurposing of space to teaching space has had overall on the entirety of pupils at the school?

224 responses



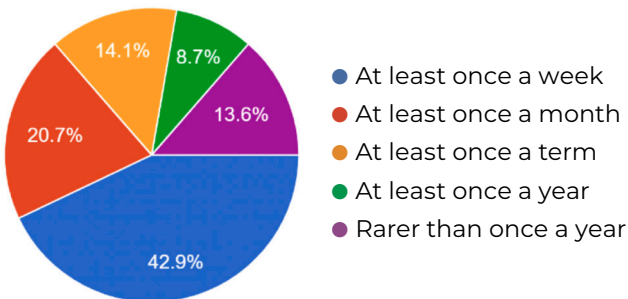
7a. Have you ever been verbally abused at work?

224 responses



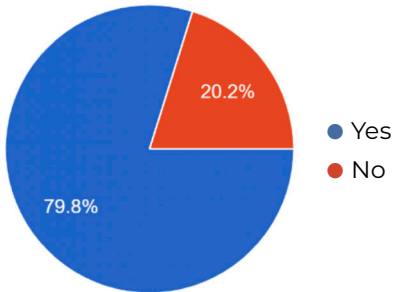
7b. If you answered yes to question 7a, how often does it occur?

184 responses



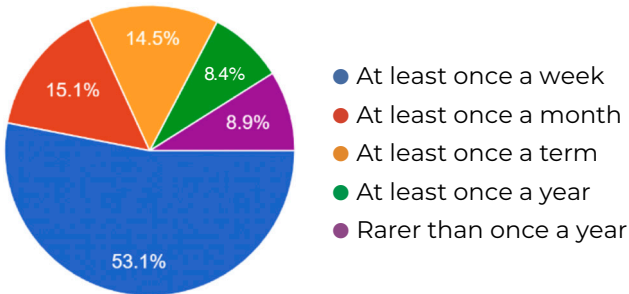
8a. Have you ever experienced violence/physical abuse?

223 responses



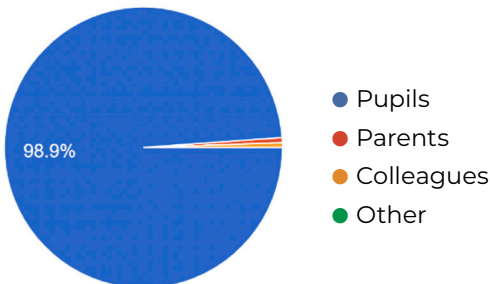
8b. If you answered yes to question 8a, how often does it occur?

179 responses



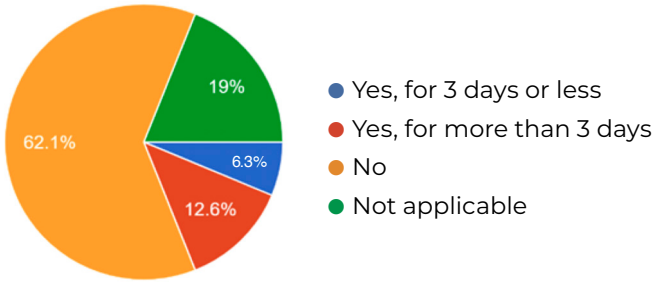
8c. If you answered yes to question 8a, who have you experienced abuse from? (Participants may select more than one response)

178 responses



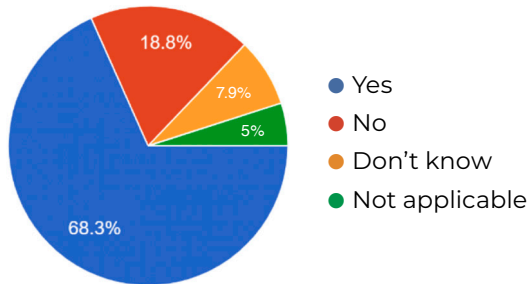
8d. If you answered yes to question 8c, were you absent from school or college due to the injury?

174 responses



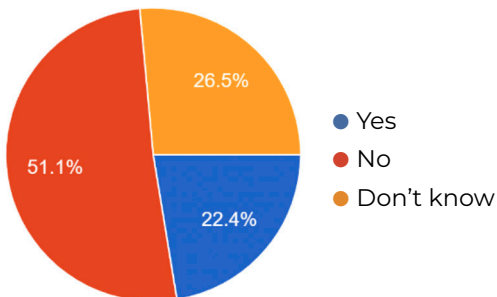
9. Has your experience of work-related violence physical abuse/and/or verbal abuse negatively affected your working life?

202 responses



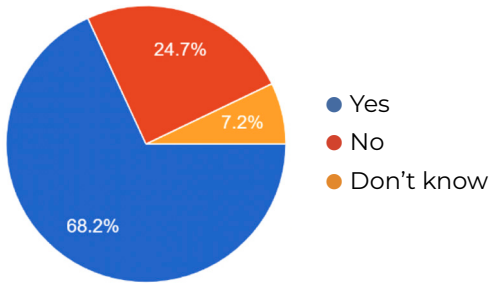
10. Are all incidents of verbal abuse recorded in your workplace?

223 responses



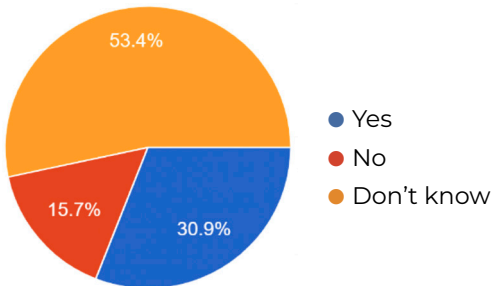
11. Has your principal/line manager ever shown you how to report a violent incident?

223 responses



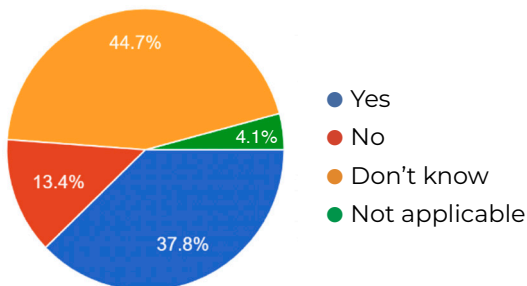
12. Do you know if your school has a Risk Assessment Policy relating to violence against staff?

223 responses



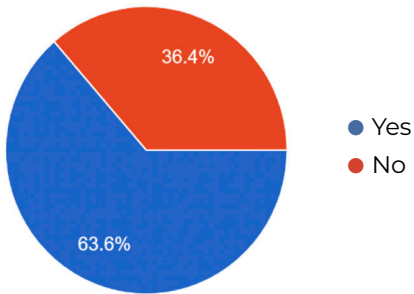
13. If your school has policies in place in relation to violent behaviour, are they followed?

217 responses



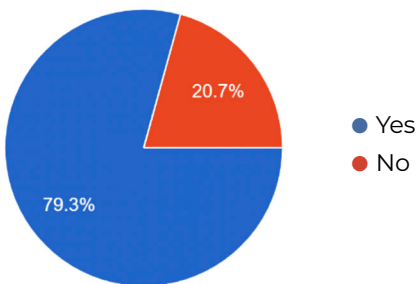
14. Do you feel safe in your place of work?

220 responses



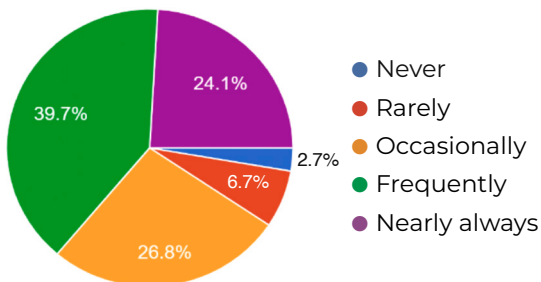
15. Are staff absences affecting the safe delivery of education in your classroom?

222 responses



16. Have you felt constrained into prioritising the safety of pupils and staff over the need to deliver teaching and learning in class?

224 responses



School environment:

Summary of current situation:

Teacher experience:

The results of this survey demonstrate the current situation very succinctly. The impact of the overcrowding in special schools and high turnover of staff has meant that teaching staff have been open to physical and/or verbal abuse on an ongoing basis. An increasing number of behavioural issues among students is also a concern when funding for counselling, therapeutic interventions and adequate staffing is constrained.

This adds to the challenges for teachers and support staff, when trying to manage this on an ongoing basis. There is an increasing demand for SEN provision in Northern Ireland, with the number of students being assessed and issued statements of educational need rising year on year. However, the supply of specialised school places and resources has not been keeping up with this growing trend.

With the vast majority of special schools oversubscribed and having to turn away students, there is a severe lack of special school places available. This has led to increased pressure on mainstream schools to accommodate more students with special needs without adequate funding, training or facilities.

Implications of this survey:

The survey highlights serious issues around excessive workloads, lack of rights/protections, inadequate funding, and insufficient training for special school teachers in Northern Ireland. The lack of support and resources directly impacts:

- **quality of education and outcomes for students with special needs;**
- **ability to meet complex learning needs and provide individualised support;**
- **teacher morale, burnout, and retention rates;**
- **overall effectiveness of the special education system; and**
- **lack of tailored, well-resourced training opportunities for special education teachers to develop specialised skills.**

Recommendations:

- **Increase funding to expand specialist staff, interventions, and resources.**
- **Improve professional development opportunities tailored to special education.**
- **Implement policies and protections to support teacher rights and work/life balance.**

- **Explore workload reforms and additional classroom/administrative supports.**
- **The electronic reporting system in relation to verbal and physical violence in all schools should be used and its use needs to be enforced. When an incident has been reported, special school staff need to know that something is being done. This needs to be done consistently and on a timely basis.**
- **Full evaluation of the intervention strategies in relation to behavioural issues.**

To summarise: addressing the workload burdens, lack of resources/funding, and training deficiencies for special school teachers must be a top priority to improve educational outcomes and workplace conditions in Northern Ireland's special education system.

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