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Admissions Policy for Saplings Special School Mullingar

Saplings Special School Mullingar was established in 2006 and has been funded and resourced by the Department of Education and Skills since March 2011. This policy has regard to the funding, resources, services, and space available.

The Board of Management of Saplings Special School Mullingar has developed this policy in accordance with the Education Act 1998, the Education Welfare Act 2000, the Equal Status Act 2000, the Disabilities Act 2005, and the EPSEN Act 2004. It is subject to directions from the Patron and the Minister for Education.

The Board of Management acknowledges parents' right to send their child to the school of their choice and will provide clear and transparent information to assist parents with enrolment decisions.

Taking into account the Department regulations and programmes, the rights of the patron as set out in the Education Act, and the funding available, the school supports the principles of;

- Provision of evidence based appropriate education which is child centred and individualised to each pupil and takes account of the autism specific nature of provision.
- The provision of autism specific education using evidence-based data driven interventions including Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Social Stories, Lámh, Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), by appropriately qualified professional staff.
- Inclusiveness, particularly with reference to the enrolment of children with a disability or other special education need.
- Equality of access and participation in the school.
- Parental choice in relation to enrolment.
- Respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society.
- Co-education and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities.
- Democratically run with active participation by parents in the life of the school, whilst positively acknowledging and affirming the professional role of all staff.

Rationale

This policy aims to ensure that the appropriate procedures are in place to enable the school

- To make decisions on all applications in an open and transparent manner consistent with the ethos, the mission statement of the school and legislative requirements.
- To make an accurate and appropriate assessment of the capacity of the school to cater for the needs of applicants in the light of the resources available to do it.

- To put in place a framework which will ensure effective and productive relations and dialogue between students, parents, teachers, Management and the BOM where a student is admitted to the school.

Legal Framework

Section 9 (j) of the Education Act 1998 specifies, that:

“A recognised school shall... subject to this Act and in particular section 15 (“(d), establish and maintain an admission policy which provides for maximum accessibility to the school”.

Section 15 (2) states the Board of Management shall:

“publish the policy of the school concerning admission to and participation in the school and ensure that policy principles of equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents’ choice are respected”.

Section 27 (1) states that:

“A Board shall establish and maintain procedures for the purposes of informing students in a school of the activities of the school” and (2) that “the procedures established and maintained under subsection (1) shall facilitate the involvement of the students in the operation of the school having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers”.

The Education Welfare Act, 2000 [section 19(1)] requires that a Board of Management shall not refuse to admit a child except where such refusal is in accordance with the school’s Admission Policy. Section 19 (2) requires that the Board of Management, shall as soon as possible (but no later than 21 days) after receiving such information “make a decision in respect of the application concerned and inform the parent in writing thereof”.

EPSEN Act, 2004 [SECTION 2] Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 requires that: “A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with: The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act and The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.”

The Equal Status Act, 2000 [Sections 5 & (2)] prohibits discrimination on the grounds of “gender, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, age disability, race or membership of the Travelling Community” regarding admission, access to programmes, participation in the school or regarding expulsion or any other sanction. There are limited exceptions regarding single-sex schools and schools promoting particular religious values. [section 7 (3)]

Saplings Special School Mullingar will cooperate with the NCSE in the performance by the Council of its functions under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 in relation to the provision of education to children with special educational needs, including in particular by the provision and operation of a special class or classes when requested to do so by the Council. Saplings Special School Mullingar will comply with any direction served on the board or the patron under section 37A and 67(4)(b).

NCSE Notification Timeline

The Department of Education and the NCSE have introduced new measures to support better forward planning and to provide earlier clarity for families of children with special educational needs.

- Parents/guardians must notify the NCSE by 1 October 2025 if their child requires a special class or special school place for the 2026/2027 school year.
- This earlier timeline will also apply for subsequent school years.

- Parents/guardians can notify the NCSE via the Parents Notify System on the NCSE website: <https://ncse.ie/notify-ncse-special-class-special-school>.
- Parents/guardians who engage with this process will receive a letter from the NCSE confirming the outcome of their review of supporting evidence. This letter must be provided to schools as part of the application for enrolment.
- Applications for 2026/27 must be accompanied by an NCSE 2026/27 Eligibility Letter. Historic eligibility letters for 2025/26 or earlier will not be sufficient. Each child must have a valid 2026/27 eligibility letter.

Aim and Objectives

- To provide a quality driven, appropriate educational service to all children in the school, within the requirements of all recent legislation pertaining to Special Needs Education.
- To ensure that the criteria are informed by our ethos, our mission statement and current legislation
- To strive towards the integration of children in the school into mainstream education, having regard for levels of disability, available resources and suitability for such integration.
- To ensure students have access to a broad, balanced, relevant and developmental range of curricular experiences in each dimension for learning as set out in The Primary School curriculum (1999), the Junior Cycle Program, The Primary Language Curriculum and any other appropriate curricular resources
- To enhance the communicative and social skills of the children in the school.
- To inform parents about the school, its programmes, activities and procedures.
- To enable applications for admission to the school to be handled in an open and transparent manner.
- To put in place criteria under which applications shall be considered.
- To specify what information is required by the school at the time of application.

Policy Considerations

The Board of Management of Saplings School Mullingar reserves the right of admission if such admissions contravene Departmental guidelines on class size, eligibility etc.

Taking into account the Department regulations and programmes, the rights of the patron as set out in the Education Act, and the funding available, the school supports the principles of;

- Provision of evidence based appropriate education which is child centred and individualised to each pupil and takes account of the autism specific nature of provision.
- The provision of a range of autism specific education using evidence based, data driven interventions.
- Inclusiveness, particularly with reference to the inclusion of children in a mainstream setting.
- Equality of access and participation in the school.
- Parental choice in relation to enrolment.
- Respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society.
- Co-education and a commitment to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunity.

- Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively acknowledging and affirming and professional role of all staff.

The Board of management will not refuse a child on the basis of ethnicity, disability, (ie. Severity of Autism diagnosis) Traveller status, refugee status, political beliefs, family or social circumstances, provided they fulfil the enrolment criteria.

Taking all of the above into account, The Board of Management reserves the right of admission and will liaise with the Department of Education and Skills and the SENO.

Where the school lacks the necessary resources to meet the needs of any applicant or student, it will make every effort to secure those resources.

Admission Criteria

Enrolment is confined to pupils where there is clear evidence that enrolment in an autism specific special school rather than a mainstream school or a “traditional special school” is in the child’s best interest. The maximum class size is six pupils.

Children and young people are eligible for enrolment in Saplings Special School when the following is provided in support of such an application:

1. Professional report(s) outlining:
 - a. Diagnosis of Autism: DSM IV/V or ICD 10/11 (psychologist, psychiatrist, multidisciplinary report)

AND

 - b. A demonstration of the understanding of complexity of the child’s overall level of need/s evidenced in the professional reports

AND

 - c. Given the severity or complexity of the child’s support needs, a clear professional recommendation as to what educational placement type would be most appropriate to best meet the child’s needs, along with the rationale for same

AND
2. NCSE Confirmation:
 - a. A letter from the NCSE confirming that the child is known to them and that the child has the required diagnosis and recommendation for a special class for autism.
3. Birth Certificate: Children who are aged 4 years or older or who have not yet turned 18 years by 1 September of the school year in which the enrolment will take place.

Admission Procedure

- Parents/guardians must complete an Expression of Interest form from 9 a.m. on the opening day outlined in the annual admissions notice.
- The closing date for receipt of completed Expression of Interest forms is 3.30pm on Monday 26th January.
- Late applications will be accepted but will be placed on the waiting list after all timely applications have been considered in accordance with the Admissions Policy.

When requested by the school, the following documentation must be provided:

- NCSE Eligibility Letter for 2026/27.
- Professional report(s) as described above.
- Original Birth Certificate.
- Two proofs of address (e.g. utility bills dated within the past six months).

***Important: Confirmation of receipt of expressions of interest forms/documentation is not an indication of a secured placement.**

****Expression of Interest forms and associated paperwork will only be kept on file for one academic year. Parents/guardians must reapply on a yearly basis, until such time as a placement is secured.**

Selection Criteria

Where applications exceed available places, the following order of priority applies:

1. Children who:
 - Meet the Admissions Criteria as set out above i.e. have professional reports confirming an Autism diagnosis; a recommendation for an autism-specific special school placement.
 - Have the NCSE 2026/27 eligibility letter.
 - Are aged 4 years or older and who have not yet turned 18 years by 1 September of the school year.
2. Siblings of current pupils.
3. Children who live in closest proximity to the school.
4. Children without a current school placement.

Where two or more applicants are tied under the above criteria, catchment area will be applied: children living closer to the school will be prioritised.

Please note that fulfilling the admission criteria does not ensure enrolment if sufficient places are not available and/or sufficient classroom space is not available.

If the school admission team does not receive the required documentation with the admission application form before the application deadline, the application will not be processed or considered by the school. It is the responsibility of the parent(s) guardian(s) to ensure that all supporting documentation is correct/ up to date and received by the school within the specified time frame/application deadline. Parents are notified to gather the information required once they have submitted the expression of interest and have it ready for posting to the school, to be received by 30th January 2026.

A list of unsuccessful applicants who met the criteria for the relevant enrolment year will be retained and should a placement arise mid-year we will revert to this list, however, in this instance, priority will be given to the age of children most suited to the age of the class in which a space has become available.

Late Applications

Late applications will be accepted but will be placed on the waiting list after all other applications have been categorised appropriately under this policy.

Decisions on Applications

All decisions on applications for admission to Saplings Special School Mullingar for Children with Autism and Complex Needs will be based on the following:

- The school's Admissions Policy.
- The school's annual Admissions Notice.
- The official application form and supporting documentation, including the NCSE 2026/27 Eligibility Letter, submitted within the specified time frame.

Selection criteria not included in this Admissions Policy will not be used when making decisions.

Notifying Applicants of Decisions

Applicants will be informed in writing of the school's decision within the timeline outlined in the annual Admissions Notice.

- If a place is offered, parents/guardians will receive confirmation along with next steps to secure enrolment.
- If a place is not offered, parents/guardians will be informed in writing.
- Applicants will be advised of their right to seek a review or appeal of the decision under section 29 of the Education Act 1998.

Acceptance of an Offer

When offered a place, parents/guardians must:

- Confirm acceptance within **5 school days** of receiving the offer.
- Provide information regarding whether they have applied to or are awaiting decisions from other schools, including details of those schools.

Circumstances in Which Offers May Not Be Made or May Be Withdrawn

An offer of admission may not be made or may be withdrawn where:

- Information contained in the application is found to be false or misleading.
- The applicant fails to provide a valid NCSE 2026/27 Eligibility Letter (or the relevant eligibility letter for future years).
- Required supporting documentation (professional reports, proof of address, birth certificate) is not submitted by the deadlines outlined in this policy.
- An applicant fails to confirm acceptance of an offer by the specified deadline.
- The parent/guardian, when required by the principal in accordance with section 23(4) of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, does not confirm in writing that they accept the school's Code of Behaviour and will make all reasonable efforts to ensure compliance.

- The applicant fails to comply with the acceptance of offer requirements as detailed in the annual admissions notice.
- A school application form, incorporating family details and medical history has not been completed upon enrolment for children who have secured a place.

Appeals

The school reserves the right to refuse enrolment to any pupil in exceptional cases. Such exceptional cases may arise when:

- There is no physical space available in the school or on the school site to expand, and the school has reached maximum occupancy.
- The required NCSE 2026/27 Eligibility Letter and supporting documentation are not provided in line with this policy.

Parents/guardians of any child who has been refused enrolment are entitled to appeal that refusal pursuant to section 29 of the Education Act 1998. They will be advised in writing of their entitlement to such an appeal, along with information on how to initiate the process.

Induction of New Students

It may be necessary to introduce new students on a phased basis. These students may not initially be expected to complete a full school day. This will allow the new student time to settle into the school setting gradually and successfully at their own pace.

The first year will be used to:

- Assess the child's educational needs.
- Begin to establish a behaviour Support Plan.
- Develop an SSP. to address identified needs.

Sharing of Data with other schools

Applicants should be aware that section 66(6) of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 allows for the sharing of certain information between schools in order to facilitate the efficient admission of students.

Discharge Policy

It is school policy to facilitate the discharge of pupils from the school once they have reached the age of eighteen, pupils who reach the age of eighteen after September 1st in any year will be permitted to complete that academic year. This means a June discharge in the following year. Discharge may also be recommended after the first year or subsequent years after consultation between the school and the parents/guardians if the feeling is that the placement is no longer appropriate, and a less restrictive placement may be more suitable. Discharge from the school may also happen if a pupil is fully integrated into mainstream school.

Evaluation

The Board of Management will monitor the implementation of all aspects of this policy. This policy will be amended and reviewed annually with particular emphasis placed upon

- Effective management placed on the application process
- Clarity and transparency relating to the process
- Applicants informed in good time relating to their application
- Positive parental feedback
- Current Department of Education circulars and guidance

Monitoring Procedures

The implementation of this policy will be monitored by the Board of management at the appropriate time. The principal will report to the Board of Management regarding the process of enrolment in December each year and regularly thereafter until enrolment is complete.

Where the Principal refuses admission to any applicant, by the authority delegated to her by the Board in line with this policy, such refusal shall be communicated to the Board at the earliest opportunity.

Policy review

It is fully acknowledged by all parties that this enrolment policy will be reviewed annually to ensure that it is kept up to date and that it retains its relevance. On-going evaluation and new approaches to education, NCSE guidelines, and DES agreements may require this document be modified.

- This policy was last reviewed in Nov. 2025

Final Note

Fulfilling the admission criteria does not guarantee enrolment if sufficient places are unavailable. The Board of Management reserves the right of admission in line with Department guidelines, resources, and capacity.

Date: 25 NOV 25

Signed: Joe Sullivan
Joe Sullivan (Chairman BOM)