



www.steppingstoneschool.ie

Enrolment Policy- 2023/2024

Introductory Statement

Stepping Stones under the patronage of Autism Ireland is a Special School funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for children with an autism spectrum disorder and complex needs¹. The school welcomes any referrals for enrolment for any student aged between 4 and 18 years of age who has a confirmed diagnosis of Autism (as per DSM-IV or DSM-V or ICD-10 criteria by a certified by **a psychiatrist or clinical /educational psychologist**)² ; as well as, a recommendation for ASD specific education in a specialised setting by an educational/clinical psychologist. Those referrals will be considered for enrolment in accordance with the policies and procedures more fully defined below. This enrolment policy is set out in accordance with the provisions of the Education Act 1998, the Education Welfare Act 2000, the Equal Status Act 2000, the Disabilities Act 2005, and The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, and the rules for national schools as updated by relevant DES circulars. This policy was updated in March 2020 to reflect the commencement of certain sections of the Education (Admission to Schools Act) 2018 and will be reviewed annually by the Board of Management. The Board trusts that by so doing, parents will be assisted in relation to enrolment.

The Board of Management will not refuse a child on the basis of ethnicity, disability, traveller status, refugee status, political beliefs or family or social circumstances, provided they fulfil the enrolment criteria while the needs of the current school population can be met. Fulfilling the enrolment criteria does not necessarily ensure enrolment if:

- Necessary resources pertaining to the enrolment are not available
- Sufficient classroom space is not available

¹ Complex Needs: Individuals with a primary diagnosis on the spectrum of Pervasive Developmental Delay / Autism (Asperger, autism, PDD - NOS) or Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 1, 2 or 3 as per DSM-IV/DSM-V with one or more associated difficulties in terms of: environmental / social disadvantage, cognitive or language impairment, emotional or behavioural problems.

² Assessment and classification of autism or autistic spectrum disorder by a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist using DSM-IV, V or ICD-10 and /or multidisciplinary assessment of same by a professional team (including a clinical psychologist/educational psychologist)

Taking all of the above into account, and based on the advice of the enrolment team of the School, the Board of Management reserves the right of admission.

Stepping Stones Special School is a school which, with the approval of the Minister for Education and Skills, provides an education exclusively for students with Autism and complex needs.

Parents/guardians who require clarification of any aspect of the policy should contact the Chairperson of the school's Board of Management: Mr Alan Doyle, the School Principal: Ms Dolores Cullinane. Contact details can be obtained through the main school reception 016856498

General Information

Stepping Stones is one of 12 schools currently recognised by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011 as a special school established to educate those with autism and complex needs.

The goal of Stepping Stones educational programme is the building of skills for success at home, school, and in the community. The school believes each child, with a diagnosis on the autism spectrum, is unique and therefore should have access to a range of evidence-based interventions that meet their individual needs. Stepping Stones follows this principle with a multi-disciplinary approach to service delivery and a strong focus on evidence-based instructional principles and methodologies such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Verbal Behaviour, Social Stories, Lámh and Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) etc. in line with the DES policy for special education for children on the autism spectrum. These programmes are founded on empirical evidence and a child-centred learning philosophy; allowing each child to reach his/her own individual goals and progress at their own pace. In addition, supplemental specialist services of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy are made available to children in attendance as the needs present themselves and resources are available from external agencies e.g. HSE.

Stepping Stones follow the curricular programmes prescribed by the Department of Education & Skills, which may be amended from time to time in accordance with Sections 9 and 30 of the Education Act (1998). Stepping Stones supports the principles of:

- **Inclusiveness** – particularly with reference to the enrolment of children with a disability or other special educational need.
- **Equality** – of access and participation in the school.
- **Parental Choice** – in relation to enrolment and involvement in the school and
- **Respect of Diversity** – of values, beliefs, traditions and languages.

Stepping Stones depends on the grants and teacher resources provided by the DES. It also operates within the changing regulations laid down, from time to time, by the Department of Education and Skills. Stepping Stones has

regard for the resources and funding available to meet the individual needs of students and the number of children per class. Training in the basic skills of communication, self-care and key social competences form an integral part of the school programme at all levels. Children are divided into classes according to their age, skill strengths, developmental needs, their sensory needs and their communicative ability.

Current school population

Presently, the school caters for a maximum of 30 children across 5 classrooms and is allotted a staff comprised of an Administrative Principal, a Director of Education, 5 qualified Teachers (one of whom has the post of deputy principal and one who has an AP2 post), 26 SNA's (one of whom is a behaviour analyst), and an administrator.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) employs occupational therapy services, speech and language support services and psychological services, on a limited basis, to work with specific students within the school. The school completes a referral with the student's parents to access this support. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) also provides a limited service to the school. The school meets with the NEPS psychologist appointed to the school at the beginning of the school year to determine what students will be prioritised for that academic year. These needs may change according to how the students present throughout the year.

Behavioural support services are offered from within the school community by the schools BCBA (Board Certified Behaviour Analyst) and from external consultation where the needs present themselves and the resources are available to fund such services.

The aims of Stepping Stones

1. To create a welcoming and open environment where students and their families can interact in a secure and supportive manner and where positive relationships with others can be fostered and maintained.
2. To provide a child-centred autism specific education, which draws on a range of evidence based interventions in line with the Minister's Policy for Education.
3. 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, and any other appropriate curricular resources.
4. To tailor each child's programme to their individual needs and facilitate the development of each child's unique potential.
5. To enhance the functional communication, and social skills of the children in the school
6. To strive towards the integration of the children in the school into mainstream education and ASD classes attached to main stream primary/secondary school or another Special School, having regard for levels of disability, available resources and suitability for such integration.
7. To interact with and develop community links in special education,

autism and evidence-based teaching practices on a local, national, and international level.

Application Procedure

Stepping Stones Special School provides an education exclusively for students with Autism and complex needs and may refuse admission to a student, where the student does not have the specified category of special educational needs provided for by this school.

Before an application is made, parents/guardians should ensure that:

- The child will be 4 years old on or before the 1st of September of the year in which it is proposed to enrol the child.
- Parents who wish to enrol their child are required to complete an **Expression of Interest Form** from Stepping Stones Special School for Children with Autism and Complex Needs (Appendix 1). Please see the annual admission notice on the school website from the 1st of October/first Monday in October.

Valid Expression of Interest Form³ for admissions for the next school year (commencing September) will be accepted from the **1st of October up to February 28th/29th (of the preceding school year)**.

All applications must be submitted by post to the school office by **3pm on 28th / 29th February**. Applications received after the closing date will NOT be considered and will be returned with advice to apply the following year.

All applications received on or prior the 28th /29th of February will be reviewed by the Admissions team according to the enrolment and selection criteria specified in this policy. The date of receipt of application is not given any additional weighting. Upon receipt of completed Expression of Interest forms and the requested documentation, the school administrator will send an acknowledgment via post to the parents/guardians to confirm to the family that the Expression of Interest form has been received and whether or not it is considered valid.

Any form not accompanied by the **necessary documentation** will not be considered valid until which time as the school receives a copy of the required documentation. Accordingly it is important to note that all documentation must be furnished to the school by February 28th/29th preceding the school year applied for. **NO GUARANTEE OF A PLACE IS GIVEN OR IMPLIED BY THE RECORDING OF A CHILD'S DETAILS ON THE EXPRESSION OF INTEREST LISTING.**

- The child is living within a reasonable distance from the school and travel time is within acceptable parameters between home and school facilities. Reasonable distance will be defined in accordance with the DES transportation department and the normal special school transport scheme for pupils. (Please check with your local SENO and the Transport Section of the DES).

Declaration of the non- charging of fees

The board of Stepping Stones Special School or any persons acting on its behalf will not charge fees for or seek payment or contributions howsoever described as a condition of

- a. An application for admission of s student to the school
- b. The admission or continued enrolment of a student to the school

Necessary documentation:

1. The child has a documented and confirmed diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The report must detail the classification of ASD by a psychiatrist or clinical/educational psychologist using DSM-IV, DSM-V or ICD-10 criteria or multidisciplinary assessment of same by a professional team (including a clinical psychologist/educational psychologist).
2. The child has a recent (within the last 2 years prior their enrolment date) psychological assessment in which a recommendation for ASD specific education in a specialised school is recommended by an educational/clinical psychologist.**
3. The expression of interest form is completely filled out and deemed **valid**. (the school administrator will contact you if the expression of interest form is incorrectly filled out)
4. All supporting documentation that ensures a complete overview of the child is attached to the application form including (though not limited to): current pre-school/school placement reports, home tuition reports, psychological reports, medical reports, speech and language reports, occupational therapy reports and /or behavioural support plans.

**Where it has not been possible to get an updated psychological report the BOM will accept a letter from the original/current Psychologist/Service stating that there is a recommendation for the student to attend a school for children with Autism and complex needs and that the report's depiction of the student is still current and accurate. This letter should provide some up to date information on the student and their presentation in their current setting.

Please note:

Applications received outside of the admissions period (28th/29th February) will not be taken into consideration

¹ In summary, in order to be considered valid an Expression of Interest Form must:

- The form must have been received prior to or on the 28th /29th of February of that year.
- All sections of the form must be completely and correctly filled in
- The form must be accompanied by the necessary documentation outlined above (see necessary documentation section).

Due to the great number of expression of interest forms received on a yearly basis, a selection criterion applies when oversubscribed.

There is a dedicated admissions team formed by the Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant principal 2 post holder and Director of Education. After the 28th /29th of February, the admissions team meets to consider the current school population and school leavers, with the information obtained it will identify how many vacancies are available for the following academic year, as well as, locating them in the Primary and/or the Secondary Sections of the school. A class list for the following academic year will be considered and drafted, thus ensuring that the needs of the current school population are identified and preserved prior to consideration of any new admissions.

Once the number of places available has been determined, the Admissions team will make a recommendation to the BOM based on balanced judgement, guided by the principles of natural justice and acting in the best interests of all children affected, or potentially affected by such decisions (both current population and new entrants).

The BOM also recognises that the decision to admit new entrants into the school must be made with the understanding of resources available within the school community to meet the unique needs of each child newly enrolled, and in particular, to continue meeting the needs and abilities of the children already enrolled in the school.

Due to a great volume of expression of interest forms sent to the school, the selection criteria if oversubscribed applies (please refer below).

Notification of decisions:

Once this process has been completed and the applicant meets the required criteria (see enrolment criteria below) parents/guardians will be notified in writing by the Board of Management of the school as to whether or not their child is being offered a place for the forthcoming school year 3 weeks after the closing date once it is determined that an appropriate class place is available. Parents and guardians must respond in writing to accept the offer of a school place within 5 working days (as per the admission notice). Failure to respond in writing by the specified date will result in the child's place being offered to some other family.

Parents/guardians cannot defer a place that has been offered to them. However, parents/guardians may submit a new expression of interest form for the next academic year in accordance with the admissions notice (published on our website on the last week of September) if they feel the timing of a placement does not fit with their child's needs at any given time.

Acceptance of an offer of a place by an applicant:

In accepting an offer of admission from Stepping Stones Special School you must indicate-

- 1) Whether or not you have accepted an offer of admission for another school/schools. If you have accepted such an offer you must also provide details of the offer/s concerned
- 2) Whether or not you have applied for and awaiting confirmation of an offer of admission from another school/s and if so you must provide details of the other school/s concerned.

If a student is not offered a place in Stepping Stones Special School the reasons why they were not offered a place will be communicated in writing to the applicant including, where applicable details of the students ranking against the selection criteria and details of the students place on the waiting list for the school year concerned.

It is the sole responsibility of parents/guardians to inform the school of any change of address or other contact details. In order to remain contactable should a place become available.

A school **Enrolment Form**, incorporating family details and medical history is completed on enrolment for children who have secured a place for the next school year. This enrolment form will be provided to parents once they have confirmed they are accepting the offered place in the school.

The Board of Management (BOM) of Stepping Stones Special School recognises that parents/ guardians have a desire and a legal right to request that their child be enrolled in a school of their choice. Under section 29 of the Education Act 1998, applicants have the right of appeal of the school's decision.

Circumstances in which offers may not be made or may be withdrawn:

An offer of admission may not be made or may be withdrawn by Stepping Stones School where:

- It is established that the information contained in the application is false or misleading
- An applicant fails to confirm acceptance of an offer of admissions on or before the date set out in the annual admissions notice of Stepping Stones
- The parent of a student, when required by the principal in accordance with section 23(4) of the Education (Welfare) act 2000, fails to confirm in writing that the code of behaviour of the school is acceptable to him/her and that he/she shall make all reasonable efforts to ensure compliance with such code by the student.
- An applicant has failed to comply with the requirements of "acceptance of an offer" as set out above.

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. The act allows schools to share the following information:

- The date an application was received
- The date an offer was made
- The date an offer was accepted
- A student's identifying personal details (to ensure that it is the same person applying to both schools)

Enrolment Criteria

The school's enrolment policy must also uphold the framework of the relevant legislation set forth for special school. As such, attention is drawn to Section 2 of the EPSEN Act 2004, which provides that a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive setting unless such arrangement is inconsistent with the best interest of the child or with the effective provision of education for those children with whom the child is to be educated.

As such guidelines defined in this enrolment policy, enrolment in Stepping Stones Special School will be confined to pupils for whom

1. There is clear evidence that enrolment in a special school for Autism and Complex Needs rather than in a mainstream or special school for students with general learning disabilities with no ASD classes is in the child's best interest.
2. This recommendation must be stated in the psychological assessment, in the diagnostic report or in a supplemental psychological report by an educational or clinical psychologist. The BOM, in conjunction with the Principal, In School Management team (ISM) and Director of Education with a comprehensive review of all supporting assessment reports: (such as one written by a qualified educational or clinical psychologist that state that the applicant child has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum based on the criteria specified in DSM-IV, DSM-V or ICD-10) and that the report is dated in the two years prior to enrolment date.
3. This documentation should assert that it is in the child's best interest that s/he be enrolled in a special school for children with Autism and Complex Needs. In the event of parents wishing to enrol their child in Stepping Stones School from another Special School, the multidisciplinary team of the existing school must give written approval that it is in the child's best interest to enrol in Stepping Stones Special School. It is recommended that applicants contact their local SENO and also keep the SENO informed of the progress of the application. The SENO can also make referrals to the school.

Selection Criteria if oversubscribed:

The maximum class size is six pupils. If the number of children on the Expression of Interest listing to enrol exceeds the number of places available, the following criteria will apply in priority order, beginning with

1. The needs of the current school children are still met, and the school is in a position to offer the appropriate resources to the new admissions.
2. Brothers and sisters of existing pupils.
3. Geographical catchment area-i.e. children who are living closest to the school

Waiting list in the event of over subscription:

A waiting list of students whose applications for admission to Stepping Stones Special School were unsuccessful will be compiled and will remain valid for the school year in which admission is being sought.

Should a vacancy arise during the school year 2023/2024, all applicants on the waiting list will be given equal consideration under the selection criteria at that time. This waiting list will end on the last school day in June of that academic year and the school will commence accepting applications for admission from the 1st of October 2023.

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.

The first year will be used to:

- Assess the child's educational needs
- Develop an I.E.P. to address identified needs
- Assess whether the child's placement is appropriate

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

Discharge Policy.

It is the school's Policy to facilitate the discharge of pupils from the school once they have reached that age of eighteen. Pupils, who reach the age of eighteen on the 1st of September in any year, will be permitted to complete that academic year. This means a June discharges in the following year.

A transitional document (passport) will be produced by the school staff to facilitate the transition. All efforts will be made by the school to have an updated psychological report completed before the student finishes in Stepping Stones. This, and any other reports available will be forwarded to the potential adult services as directed by the HSE before the end of the school year. An end of the school year report and passport will also be completed.

If parents/guardians of a child enrolled in the school decide to remove their child from the school, both parents/legal guardians must do so in writing. If a student leaves the school and if his/her parents wish to subsequently re-apply for enrolment for their child, the enrolment procedure above applies. Re-enrolment is subject to Stepping Stones School being considered as the most suitable placement for re-enrolment by the multidisciplinary team/clinical/educational psychologist, and that Stepping stones Special School's BOM are in agreement that adequate resources are available for re-enrolment.

Admission Date

Normally admission to the school will occur within the first week of the new academic year. Admission at any other time throughout the school year will be at the discretion of the Principal/Board of Management

Transition into Stepping Stones

On occasion, children may transfer into Stepping Stones from a different school or community service provider. This is subject to the School's enrolment policy and available space.

Should this be the case, the transition period to Stepping Stones will be determined at the discretion of the BOM and the Principal. The decision of type and length of transition should be based on the individual needs of the child and the overall welfare of current students. As transitions require some planning, a period of up to 6 weeks can at times be a reasonable expectation; however, every effort should be made to make the transition a swift and reasonable process.

Parents/guardians of children transitioning to Stepping Stones school may request a home visit if desired to support their transition. This will be offered on the School Enrolment Form. Efforts will be made to accommodate this visit, however, due to time constraints this visit is not guaranteed.

Service Expectations

The Principal will meet with parents/guardians to discuss their child's strengths and needs, profile the supports that may be required as well as the suitability of enrolment. Where the supports required for success go beyond those already in place in the school, the BOM reserve the right to refuse enrolment

on grounds of 'Exceptional Circumstances' e.g. a prospective pupil presents with physical needs such that, even with additional resources available from the DES, the school cannot meet such needs and/or provide the pupil with an appropriate education.

A comprehensive approach to education and learning will be used within the school, that is, a range of teaching approaches will be employed, based on the individual needs of the children and the overall principle of an autism-specific child-centred programme. (Some commonly used approaches include: Pivotal Response Training, the TEACCH programme, Lámh (manual signing system), Social Stories, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), etc.)

All education interventions used with the child will be:

- a) Specific to the child
- b) based on the outcome of a Psychological/Behavioural Assessment(s) and an Individual Educational Plan (IEP)
- c) evidence-based
- e) measured regularly with teaching objectives and outcomes monitored to ensure on-going success.

Parents/guardians will be consulted regularly with respect to their individual child's progress. Review meetings will occur at minimum on an annual basis, with additional meetings established on a case by case basis that may incorporate programme guides/assessment tools such as the ABLLS-R/VB-MAPP,T-TAP, PEP 3, Language Targets, Behaviour Support Plan's etc. as well as standardised assessment tools where appropriate.

The school is committed to encouraging all children, regardless of the special educational needs associated with ASD, to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities and to actively participate in developmental/academic and or vocational programs where they and their families are respected in their own right. If the BOM considers that additional resources are required to meet the particular educational/safety needs of the child, an application will be made to the Department, via the SENO (Special Education Needs Organiser) to provide same. A case-conference may be called to discuss the needs of a particular child if appropriate. Ongoing placement within Stepping Stones may depend on the provision of specialist resources.

Children enrolled in the school may also be offered the opportunity to be included in the school life of an age-appropriate mainstream class, ASD class attached to a main stream school or another Special School should their skills be suitable for such an arrangement to be made. The nature of this integration will be determined by the Principal and participating staff, in consultation with the child's parents/guardians and the governing Principal of the selected school; with a view to maximising contact over time.

Health Board Input

Essential services are to be provided by the Health Service Executive. These services include Speech and Language therapy, Occupational therapy, Dental check-ups, Psychological services etc.

Placement Review

Occasionally, concerns regarding the suitability of a child continued attendance at the school may arise. In such circumstances, a review of the school's ability to continue to meet the child's needs, safety, and the safety of others may be necessary. Any such review will be undertaken by a committee appointed by the Board of Management, in conjunction with the Principal, Director of Education and other relevant staff members.

Parents/guardians should be kept informed of any concerns that might arise in relation to their child's continued attendance at the school at the earliest opportunity. Parents/guardians will also be given an opportunity to engage in the discussion surrounding the placement and concerns that arise from the case itself. In the event that it is determined that the child is not suitably placed in the school, having regard for the realistic service options available at the time, the BOM may request a multi-disciplinary team assessment be carried out to determine the best options for the specific child.

Code of Behaviour

Parents/guardians of children enrolled in Stepping Stones, the members of the Board of Management, staff members and external consultants and volunteers are required to co-operate and support the school Code of Behaviour and all other policies and curricular organisation approved by the school's BOM. The Board of Management trust that parents/guardians will also work collaboratively with school staff as they assist the students themselves in their effort to uphold the School's Code of Behaviour. The Board of Management also expects that parents/guardians of children seeking to enter the school demonstrate the same positive collaboration and supportiveness to the staff and BOM.

Expulsion/suspension procedures are stated in Stepping Stones Code of Behaviour. After following the protocol stated in the named policy the parents will be notified by the Board of Management in writing of their entitlement to appeal a decision of the Board of Management in relation to suspension or expulsion. The content of the letter will provide information to access Circular 22/02 and other related forms.

Appeals

The Board of Management is obliged under section 19(3) of the educational Welfare Act 2000 to make a decision in writing in respect of an application for enrolment within 21 days and to inform the parents in writing of that decision. In the event that an application for enrolment in Stepping Stones is declined, a parent/guardian has a right to appeal the decision to the Board of Management, in writing, addressed to the Chairperson of the BOM, **(prior to making an appeal under section 29 of the Education Act 1998)** within 21 calendar days of being notified of the decision.

Refer to Section 29 of the *Education Act (as amended by Section 4 of the Education (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2007)*, available on the Department's website at www.education.ie for further information on appeals.

The Board of Management has responsibility for preparing a response to the appeal committee if and when an appeal is initiated as stated in Section 12,

Circular 22/02- Processing of an Appeal. Appeals under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998 will be considered and determined by an independent appeals committee appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills.

The timeline within which such an appeal must be made and the other requirements applicable to such appeals are set out in the procedures determined by the Minister under section 29B of the Education Act 1998 which are published on the website of the Department of Education and Skills.

Policy Review

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

Next review period: annually

Chairperson of the Board of Management

Principal/Secretary of the Board of Management

Reviewed on: _____

Appendix 1.



www.steppingstonesschool.ie
01 6856498 Roll No: 20379Q

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM- School Year: 2023/2024

Name of Child (in full, as on Birth Certificate):

Address at which child resides (**Please include EIRCODE**):

Date of Birth: _____

PPS Number: _____

Nationality: _____ Country of Birth: _____

Mother's Nationality: _____ Father's Nationality: _____

Mother's Name: _____ Telephone No: _____

Mother's email: _____

Father's Name: _____ Telephone No: _____

Father's email: _____

Did your child attend preschool: _____ For how long: _____

Is your child enrolled in a school currently: YES/NO (**please circle as appropriate**).

