

Special Needs Assistant

Introduction

Special Needs Assistants (SNA) help teachers in schools, by providing classroom support to pupils with a wide range of severe learning, physical or behavioural difficulties. Assistants may work in a special school or in mainstream national and secondary schools.

Assistants work under the supervision of the class teacher, helping pupils to achieve their learning goals. Other duties depend on the assistant's particular job, the type and severity of the pupils' disabilities and their age but may include:

- Helping pupils to improve their independent living skills
- Supporting pupils in social activities and outings
- Assisting pupils during therapy sessions
- Attending to pupils' physical needs

If you get a position as an assistant, you may just be working a few hours a week or you may be full-time. You do not have to be a qualified teacher or have a SNA qualification but it is worth considering. Extra skills such as sign language, music, art, sport and so on are beneficial.

Market

Presently, there are about 6,000 Special Needs Assistants in Ireland compared with fewer than 300 in 1997. The 2006 budget has increased the allocation for assistants in national schools by €14.44m (10%) to €158.65m indicating potential for more jobs.

Special Needs Assistants are employed in mainstream primary schools, special education schools and the post-primary sector. Schools are becoming more inclusive, integrating special education students into general education classrooms. This has seen the number of assistants grow considerably. There are over 107 special schools catering for particular types of disability and special needs in Ireland. You can find a list of special schools and schools with special classes on the Department of Education's website www.education.ie

It is up to the schools to advertise posts. Posts are on a contract basis. It is advisable to contact schools in the local area. Posts are usually advertised in local newspapers.

Requirements

How do I become a Special Needs Assistant?

You should enjoy working with children and be able to handle classroom situations with fairness and patience. You should have good writing skills and be able to communicate effectively with students and teachers.



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
www.teagasc.ie

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

Some specific duties involve:

- Preparation and tidying up of classroom(s) in which special needs is/are being taught.
- Assisting children to board and alight from school buses
- Special assistance for pupils with particular difficulties e.g. helping physically disabled pupils with typing or writing.
- Assistance with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene.
- Assisting on out-of-school visits, walks and similar activities.
- Assisting the teachers in the supervision of pupils with special needs during assembly, recreational and periods.
- General assistance to the class teachers

See www.into.ie for more details on the duties involved.

Do I need qualifications?

The minimum educational requirement is Junior Certificate. Details are set out in 'Qualifications and Conditions of Service' for Special Needs Assistants on the Department of Education website. Many assistants FETAC level 6 or above qualifications. There are also numerous courses available in assistant training and while these are not required for the positions, in a competitive situation a qualification or willingness to undergo training would naturally be seen as advantageous.

You can contact your Vocational Education Committee Adult Education Officer for courses in your area. Some of the courses available can be found at the special education support service website at www.sess.ie

The College of Progressive Education offers a distance learning option and also run courses in some counties. Telephone (01) 4884300 E-mail: info@progressivecollege.com or see website www.practicalchildcare.com

The Church of Ireland College offers training courses: Telephone (01) 497 0033 E-mail: rbourne@cice.ie

How much will I earn as a Special Needs Assistant?

Special Needs Assistants have a structured pay scale and all other entitlements attached to that post. As of January 2006 there is a 13 point salary scale starting from €20,128 reaching a maximum of €34,447 or (approximately €12.05 to €19.54 per hour). More information on rates of pay can be found at www.impact.ie or www.education.ie

Legislation for part-time workers means that assistants are also included in the pension scheme operating within the Department of Education and Science. Assistants are also entitled to be paid during July and August provided they are returning to employment in September.

Are there any grants available to help me become a Special Needs Assistant?

Special Needs Assistant courses may be grant aided if you are in receipt of Social Welfare payments, Lone parent allowances etc. Check with your Local VEC, FAS, or Social Welfare.

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