

Dear An Taoiseach,

26 July 2011

In light of the recent decision by Minister Quinn not to fund the proposal that was submitted to him by Achieve ABA in March 2011 which will result in the closure of the school this Friday 29th July 2011, we believe that you as leader of Fine Gael owe a responsibility to us the parents of Aidan (an 8 year old boy who has autism) and to all of the other parents involved in our school to answer one question in a very straightforward manner.

When did Fine Gael change their policy on educating children with autism and adopt the same policies as the previous Fianna Fail led administration?

You will recall that with you as leader, Fine Gael introduced a motion into the Dáil on 12 February 2008 which clearly laid out your party's position on this issue. Before that motion, parents from Achieve ABA met with your education spokesperson at that time Mr Brian Hayes to discuss this issue. Parents also subsequently met with Mr Fergus O Dowd in November 2010 when he was your education spokesperson. In an e mail sent by Minister James Reilly on 23 July 2010, he stated:

"As somebody with a special interest in this area, I am appalled by the bullying tactics which could negate many of the advances made in ABA schools in the area of special needs education.

Fine Gael has called on the Minister to postpone the deadline for signing up to the transition to special school status pending an independent and transparent review into the educational outcomes of the ABA pilot project and have also criticised the Minister's decision to railroad schools into making a decision on this matter within three weeks, without adequate time to consider the proposals at stake".

You are personally familiar with our proposal and our school and you know how we have struggled to survive for over 5 years in the absence of any direct State funding. Over the last year in particular, the only reason we were able to survive was the prospect of a new Fine Gael led Government that would at a minimum review the policy of the previous Fianna Fail administration. This hope was clearly based on your attempts to pass that Dáil motion in February 2008, a motion that the current Minister for Education fully supported at that time.

The Achieve ABA proposal works out at 20% cheaper than alternative places currently funded by the State. The proposal sat in the Department of Education & Skills for three months with not one single question raised or an offer of a meeting to discuss it and then it was rejected because it was not in line with "departmental policy".

In a meeting held on Friday 8th July 2011, Mr Jim Mulkerrins (Principal Officer – Special Education section) noted that the debate on policy was now ended and that the Department policy was now Government policy. This came as a surprise to us as we understood that the Government decided policy and not some Principal Officer in the Department of Education & Skills.

Not only have we had to unnecessarily endure waiting three months for a rejection of the proposal but we now have to endure the "Spin" from the Minister for Education's office and some of his officials in relation to what has happened and attached is a letter to Minister Quinn that hopefully addresses this issue in detail.

You will also find attached a letter sent to the CEO of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Ms Teresa Griffin which details how that organisation is engaged in what can only be described as a game of **"Pass the parent"** from one NCSE official to the next NCSE official instead of actually sourcing an appropriate educational placement. We have been passed to eight different NCSE officials within the last six weeks and we are no closer to identifying an alternative placement for our son Aidan. Unfortunately, Ms Griffin who only took up the position as CEO of the NCSE in April 2011 is according to her automated e mail response out of the office until Tuesday 23 August 2011.

This is not a case of some broken manifesto promise by Fine Gael made in the middle of a General Election campaign. This involves your party introducing a detailed well thought out motion into the Dáil and subsequently ignoring completely what you had tried to achieve whilst in opposition. This issue is clearly not only about eight children with autism who live in Dublin but potentially thousands of children with autism who are currently attending one of the 400+ Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) units across the entire country, where the Department of Education have been unable to produce a policy document to support their preferred educational model and their stated policy position cannot even be implemented as explained in earlier correspondence. It also potentially affects those children with autism who have yet to receive any service from the State and those children who have not yet been diagnosed.

Taoiseach, reflecting your assurances of a more open, empathetic and compassionate governance of this country and your rejection of the information vacuums favoured by the past government you stated, **"Paddy wants to know the story"**. We now ask that you respect our right as parents and our children's right **"to know the story"** and that you honestly answer the question posed above.

Yours sincerely,

Deborah & Daniel O Mahony