



'Nobody wants to talk to you. You get copy-and-paste emails' – parents on exhausting battle to secure special school places



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Every morning Holly Walsh takes her daughters to preschool with her six-year-old son in tow. The pair then return home, as he has no school place.

Kristian Walsh, who is approaching his third year without a school place, lives in Ballymun, Dublin, with his mother Ms Walsh (31) and siblings Katie, Chloe and Callum. He is autistic, non-verbal and has an intellectual disability.

Kristian likes trains, playing on his tablet and jumping on his trampoline. He enjoys going to Lidl and carrying around his own basket, under supervision from his mother.

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“For others it’s a bit odd, maybe. But heading to Lidl brings Kristian comfort,” Ms Walsh said.

“He likes managing his own shop. He has very specific needs for his food and it’s a chance for him to try to do something new.”

From Ms Walsh’s perspective, Kristian is craving practical instruction on life skills and being out in his community, opportunities that special schools offer.

Since Kristian left preschool in 2024, Ms Walsh has engaged extensively with schools, the National Council For Special Education (NCSE), the Department of Education, elected representatives and advocacy organisations, but feels frustrated at the response.

In one email she received from the NCSE, Kristian was misgendered.

“After two or three years, you start realising nobody is taking accountability. Nobody wants to talk to you. You’re met with copy-and-paste emails,” Ms Walsh said.

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my day*

Holly Walsh

She has received nine refusal letters from schools for September, despite being issued a letter of eligibility for a special school place earlier this year. Last year she was sent seven refusals.

Before Kristian had a diagnosis of an intellectual disability, she also applied to autism units, as well as special schools.

This means her son received 47 refusal letters for the 2024-2025 school year.

According to the 31-year-old, the NCSE has acknowledged Kristian’s need for a special school place, but has yet to communicate a plan to secure this for him.

Ms Walsh was required to leave her job as a preschool teacher to care for Kristian.



Holly and Kristian Walsh at home in Ballymun © Gareth Chaney

“Kristian’s needs are quite high and demanding,” she said. “I have to try to split my time into four as a normal parent, but I’m unable to do that because most of my time I’m fighting for a school place. I’m ringing, I’m emailing. It takes a big chunk of my day.”

Kristian has never received therapy from a professional, such as an occupational therapist or a speech and language therapist.

In 2023, Ms Walsh engaged a solicitor to take action on his behalf to secure an accurate “service statement”, which is a document that details the services the HSE proposes to provide to meet a child’s needs.

Her solicitor filed a formal complaint in 2025, which led to a successful case against the HSE. The HSE was required to provide Ms Walsh with a more detailed statement by the deadline of June 4, 2026.

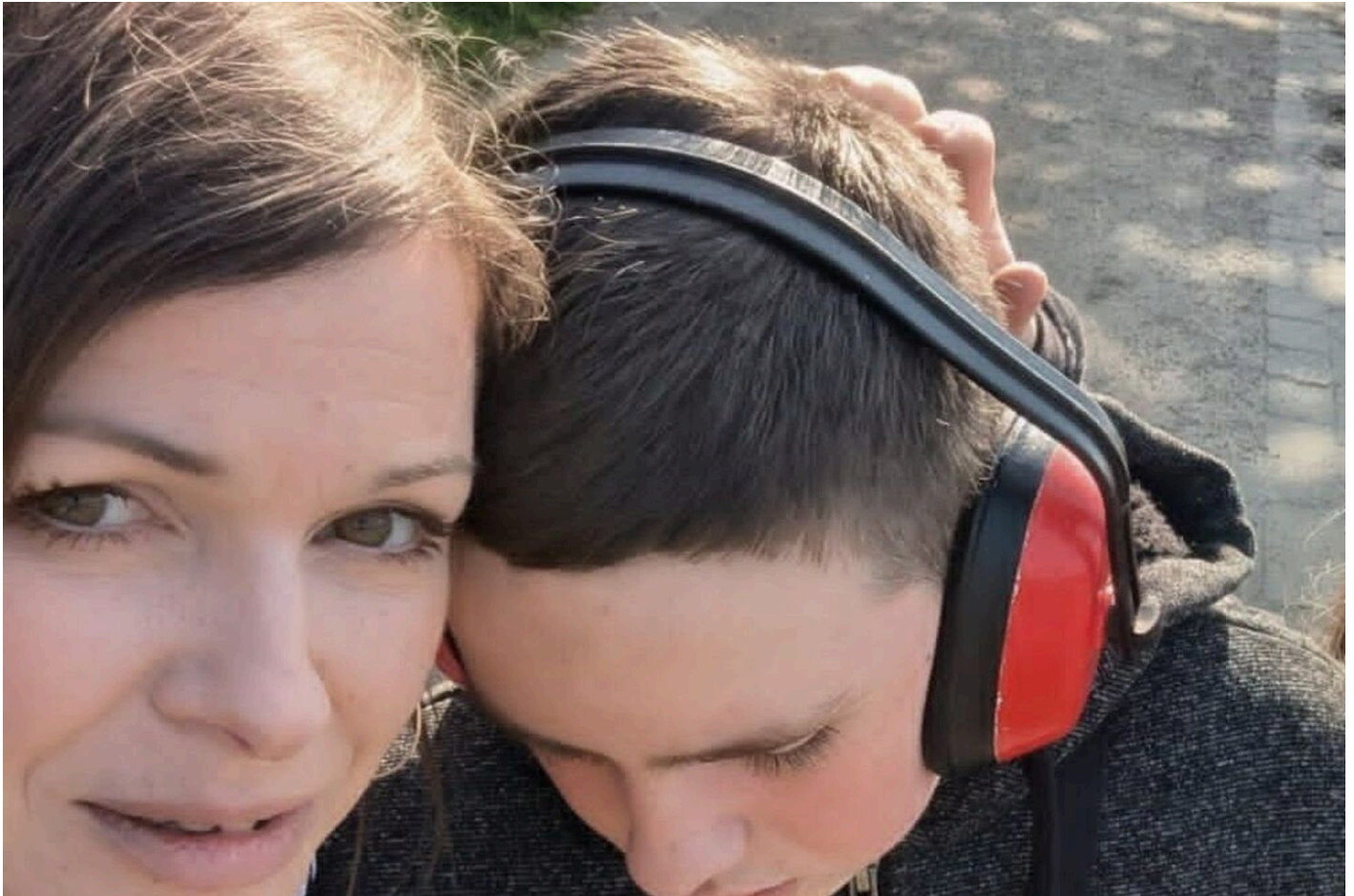
Ms Walsh is not satisfied with the statement, which references therapeutic interventions for Kristian that are planned for 2027 and 2028. It reads: “Based on current internal waiting times, it is anticipated that Kristian will be seen for speech and language therapy by March 2027.”

Speaking in the Dáil on June 10, Taoiseach Micheál Martin said the Government wants “every child to have a place in September”.

His comments came following reports earlier this year of an estimated shortfall of 2,300 school places.

A Department of Education spokesperson said the department and the NCSE will continue to monitor the need for additional special school capacity on an ongoing basis.

Meanwhile, Dundalk mother Alexandra Jedrzejewska (47) took time out of her busy week last Wednesday to travel to Leinster House.



Alexandra Jedrzejewska and her son Tristan

Outside the building, she held a placard that read: “Tristan wants to go to school.”

Her son Tristan (12) is autistic and has an intellectual disability. He has yet to secure a secondary school place for September.

Ms Jedrzejewska intends to protest again outside Government Buildings, as seven school applications have led to zero prospects for her son.

She said she could not bring herself to attend his primary school graduation recently due to the emotional strain of advocating for her son.

He has been attending an autism unit in St Nicholas National School, but with his diagnosis of an intellectual disability three years ago, his mother had hoped for her son to attend a special school for his secondary education.



Alexandra Jedrzejewska protesting outside Leinster House © Sam Boal/Collins Photos

In April she learnt that the school she had applied to in October would not be able to provide Tristan with a place.

This came after several months of seeking updates in relation to the construction of modular units, which now will not be delivered on time.

“The communication from the department has been so challenging. I’ve received no guidance,” she said.

Ms Jedrzejewska, who during Covid began getting involved in advocacy, said she knows roughly 60 families who are in a similar situation.

“Even comparing our situation to others, we don’t have it so bad because we get respite and some community support,” she said.

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“There are families who have none because they are too tired to fight.”

The Department of Education was contacted for comment.

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