

MUM'S SPECIAL NEEDS FIGHT

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS

A MOTHER who's fighting to get her child into a special school says "the whole system is broken from the very bottom up".

Mum Charlotte Cahill told *The Irish Sun* she has had to take legal action to get an assessment of needs for her daughter Cyra – who's had 22 applications to schools for this September rejected because they are too full.

Cyra Sadilua, five, was diagnosed with autism at 18 months and has been fighting for everything all her life, from health checks and services – and even a school place.

Her mother said they were forced to pay for a private assessment of needs which resulted in her daughter being prescribed medicine that left her in hospital.

Since then, she has battled with the HSE for assessments of needs checks that have repeatedly come back with mistakes – including the report having another child's name on it.

Charlotte has since taken legal proceedings to get her daughter the checks and care she needs.

She said: "The whole system is just broken from the very bottom up. Just getting the assessment of needs is a nightmare."

"The only way you are getting it now is by going through the legal system. That, in itself, costs a lot of money for parents that they don't have, because they are already paying a small fortune for therapies – because they can't get the services they need."

Charlotte has helped to set up a group called Fighting for Appropriate School Places, in Tallaght, Dublin, where parents are coming together to campaign for education for their kids.

Little Cyra had to get a one-year extension in her current special pre-school because no primary school would take her due to a lack of availability.

Mum Charlotte told how her daughter regressed during eight weeks last year when she had no school to go to.

Now the family is terrified this will happen again if she does not get a school place soon.

She told *The Irish Sun*: "With kids with additional needs, the majority of their schooling at this stage is more teaching them independence and life skills."

"Cyra is absolutely flourishing in pre-school. She is brushing her teeth by herself. She's able to hold a spoon and eat by herself. She is able to sit at the table with the other children and be social."

"It's magical how she has grown and my concern is she will go backwards without a school place."

"There was an eight-week gap where we were fighting to get that third year in pre-school – and during those eight weeks, Cyra massively regressed."

"Every single morning she would come downstairs, get her school bag and be ready to go out the door. When I would try to explain that we're not going to school, she would get so upset and she would hit herself and wouldn't come out of her room."

"At the fifth or sixth week, we ended up in A&E with her because she was totally back to injuring herself."

"It was really, really painful to watch that happen. We finally got her back to school and she went back to being a happy bubbly girl and I am absolutely petrified of what is to come if we don't get a school place again this year."

Charlotte is now urging the Government to fix the system that has been broken for decades, as many affected families continue to have to fight and campaign for the basic right to an education.

Charlotte said: "I met a lady at a protest last year and she said her daughter

Challenge . . . Cian O'Callaghan



Legal action . . . mum Charlotte just wants an education for her daughter Cyra

The whole system is broken from bottom up

The State is failing kids & their families

When I tell Cyra there's no school for her she gets upset.. it's painful to watch

LITTLE GIRL TURNED AWAY BY 22 SCHOOLS

is 22. And she said, 'I was standing here 20 years ago fighting for the exact same things'.

"So 20 years on and we are still fighting for the same things – a child's rights. A right to an education – this isn't just want or need."

This comes as shocking figures show more than 14,000 children have been waiting longer than legally allowed for an assessment of needs for disability.

The *Dail* was told: "The State is failing child-

ren and families." Under the law, the State must provide an assessment of needs check on children within six months of an application being made, so that they can then get the appropriate care and support they need.

However, new data from the HSE shows that 14,221 children were overdue their assessments at the end of 2024 – an increase of more than 5,000 kids from the end of 2023.

The average wait time for these vital checks for children now stands at two years. The figures

provided to Social Democrats leader Holly Cairns highlight that the wait list shows no sign of improving, as demand dramatically outstrips supply.

Some 4,162 assessments of need were carried out in 2024, with 10,690 applications for checks received by the HSE.

Social Democrats deputy leader Cian O'Callaghan challenged the Taoiseach yesterday on the issue, as he said: "The State is failing children and their families."

Deputy O'Callaghan told how families are being forced to take

legal cases against the State to move up the wait list, with law firms cashing in on these cases while the taxpayer foots the bill.

Yesterday, Taoiseach Micheal Martin said he wants therapies for kids with additional needs to move from the HSE and into schools – particularly in special schools.

He added that there are issues around the recruitment of staff for the sector and claimed a High Court ruling on the assessments of needs in 2022 has had an impact on the service.

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FAMILY'S FIGHT FOR AN EDUCATION



The names
got basically
drawn out
of a hat

—REBECCA MEEHAN

NO EDUCATION

Jay and his dog and, right, with mum Rebecca who lost school place after lotto-style draw

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS
Political Correspondent

A DEVASTATED mum who can't find a place in a special school for her son has told how the State is "playing EuroMillions" with her child's education.

New Education Minister Helen McEntee last week pledged she will make sure every child needing special education will have a school place come September.

However, parents across Ireland are still struggling to find places in special schools that can cater for their kids.

Five-year-old Jay Meehan, who is autistic, is one of 20 children left without a place at their local special school – St John's in Dungarvan, Co Waterford.

The school's waiting list was so oversubscribed that a lottery-style draw took place for the eight available places.

Jay's mum Rebecca Meehan told *The Irish Sun*: "The names were basically drawn out of a hat."

"It was done by a lottery system with a superintendent garda in the area. It's mental."

"It is all above board as well. It's like playing the EuroMillions with my child's education."

The grim situation highlights the chronic lack of school places for children with additional needs right across the country.

Rebecca has been campaigning with other families in Dungarvan for two temporary modular units to be built at St John's Special School to take in more children.

She said: "The system just seems to be invented to exhaust parents."

"We have all our facts. The children have their rights. The constitution is there to protect them. It's a stressful environment for a lot of parents. It's unfair."

"I've given up my career. I've done a masters in autism studies. I've done a special needs assistant (SNA) course."

"We have a sensory room in the house. We have a service dog for him. I've gone after absolutely everything I can physically get him but an education."

"I can't build a school. If I could I would. As parents, we are doing everything we can."

"These kids need this school and they could be in these modular units by September."

"It is going to happen. He is going to that school. I will chain myself to the gates of the school if they don't let him in."

Principal Aoife O'Neill previously

said: "I am working with the National Council For Special Education and partners in Cork to see how capacity can be expanded down there to help our cause here and more importantly to help the parents [and] guardians who are crying out for an appropriate school place for their child."

In Dublin, mum Anita Daynes is facing a similar battle to try and find son Leighton a place in a special school. The seven-year-old, from Tallaght, is autistic and has a moderate intellectual disability.

Leighton currently goes to a mainstream school, with the help of an SNA. But his mum says doctors and teachers agree he

needs to be in a special school. However, he has been repeatedly left on waiting lists for special schools in recent years without ever managing to get a place.

Mum Anita told *The Irish Sun*: "Leighton has an SNA in the school who is amazing, but the school has no facilities. I had to give up work two years ago because I kept getting phone calls every day to come and change his nappy as they have no facilities."

"I've been fighting for everything and I've done every single course they've recommended to try and help but there are just no services."

"Every year I get a letter from the HSE to say he will be seen to

next year, and then it becomes the next year and the next year."

"Just to get his assessment of needs I sat outside our HSE facility for three months every day until they gave us an appointment and I'd say they only rang me to get rid of me."

Anita is waiting to hear back from two special schools in the area for a place this September, but parents have been told staff shortages are impacting places.

Anita belongs to a group of local parents called Fighting for Appropriate School Places, who have come together to campaign.

She added: "We're going to be having a protest outside the Dail

or Government Buildings. I would go on hunger strike. I really would stay outside their door, day and night, once I have someone to look after my kids. I know that might sound a bit nuts but it is just whatever you can do."

And in a message to Taoiseach Micheal Martin, Anita declared: "I'd like him to think about what it is like to step into our shoes for one day – the stress that we go through to try and get our children an education."

"They need to do more for the schools and the SNAs need to be paid properly. Our kids would be lost without the SNAs."

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“They’re playing EuroMillions with my son’s future”

MUM'S FURY AT SPECIAL NEEDS 'LOTTO'



Tariffs bring an uncertain future

WELL, he did exactly as he said he'd do.

Last night, US President Donald Trump shook the global economy to its core as he announced a wave of new tariffs – including 20 per cent on imports from the EU.

On the day he was sworn in, the former reality TV star and businessman declared that he was “saved by God to make America great again”.

He has talked about restoring the golden age of America and making the country a manufacturing superpower.

Well, that mission, if it hadn't already started, went into overdrive last night.

Attention now turns to the consequences of his actions. We know tariffs on all Irish exports will lead to higher costs, particularly in the pharma sector.

And there are also huge concerns for the agri-food sector, as well as beverages and spirits.

Before the announcement last night, Taoiseach Micheal Martin said the new levies are the “most serious issue” to face the Irish economy in a long time.

US economists have even warned that higher tariffs could wipe out millions of jobs and push up unemployment.

It seems there will be few winners. European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said the tariffs will be “negative, the world over”.

The ripple effects of Trump's bold declarations are already being felt. Vietnam said on Tuesday it would slash duties on a range of goods to appease the US leader.

Other top exporters are seeking to build up alliances, with China, Japan and South Korea speeding up talks on a free trade agreement.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke with Trump on “productive negotiations” towards a UK-US trade deal.

So make no mistake, a lot of what Trump announced last night is a tactic to force the EU – who he has said are trying to “screw the US” – back to the negotiating table.

It is critical we have no knee-jerk reactions. Cool heads are needed.

Thankfully, it will likely be the end of this month before the European Commission, which is in charge of EU trade policy, responds.

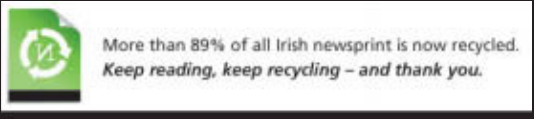
We don't need the damage done in Washington compounded by Brussels.

Last night, the Taoiseach held emergency calls with the leaders of the main political parties as they discussed a way forward. A Dail debate on the issue is also pencilled in for next week.

It will take a number of days to fully digest the impact of the new levies. And, as with everything Trump-related, positions could change and goalposts move.

His unpredictability is both his greatest strength and weakness.

Attention must now turn to the future. We have come through worse, and we will come through this, too.



WORLD AUTISM DAY SEES 100s AT DAIL PROTEST



I don't feel equipped to home educate – but I have to
— SUSANNE O'BRIEN

Mum's the word ... Susanne at Dail on behalf of her son, Jack

“Every Child Deserves a
★ Chance to Learn! ★



Jack Aged 6
Needs an Autism Class



Raising their voices ... parents yesterday

By ADAM HIGGINS
Political Correspondent

A HEARTBROKEN mum told how she has been forced to leave her job after 26 years to home school her son – after getting 18 rejection letters from special schools that are too full.

Hundreds of parents of children with additional needs took their fight for school places to the Dail on World Autism Day, as they camped outside the gates of Leinster House in protest.

Families held signs with photos of their children and chanted “let them in”, as they pleaded with politicians to put resources in place to open more special schools nationwide.

Parents came from across the country to have their voices heard outside the Dail, with families from Donegal, Cork and Waterford all attending the protest.

One mum, Susanne O'Brien, who works beside Leinster House, told The Irish Sun that she has been forced to leave her job of 26 years to home school her child because there are no school places.

Susanne, from Dublin, has already received 18 rejection letters from schools that are too full as she tries to find a place for her six-year-old son Jack, who is autistic.

Fighting back tears, Susanne told The Irish Sun: “The irony is I work 100 yards down the road from here for 26 years in the same employment, and I've just had to hand in my notice in work to home school my child.

“It hurts knowing that he just thrives on the routine. I don't feel equipped to home educate. It's way outside my realm – but I have to. He is the most important thing to us and the job comes second.”

Jack was last year given an exemption to stay in pre-school for an extra year because there were no appropriate primary school places available for him.

Susanne fears her son could regress if he doesn't get to continue his education in an appropriate school. She said: “His pre-school are absolutely fantastic and they are the reason why he has come on so much.

“We're in our second year of no school place, so the thought of him regressing is real.

“He thrives and thrives on routine and his schedule in school, and the thought of not having that – he will undoubtedly regress.

“We've done 18 applications and they were all rejections. We've just heard of two schools due to open classes, so when they open, we will apply as well. We're living on a prayer, really.”

Susanne is pleading with the Government to take urgent action to address the situation. She said: “They need to realise the urgency. If I'm honest, I think it is gone beyond for Jack this year and probably some of the other kids.

“It is not fixable from now until September. In all honesty, they just need to put everything behind this. “I understand we have a housing

- ANGRY PARENTS DEMAND ACTION
- PLEA FOR SPECIAL NEEDS FUNDING



FOR THE CHILDREN

Parents out in force for kids like Luke Gahan from Tallaght, above

crisis and I understand they are all about the tariffs and everything that Trump is about to unload on us, but these are kids in your country, your citizens that are absolutely being failed, left, right and centre.”

Emily McPhillips Sheridan, 20, from Co. Cavan, is autistic and attended yesterday's protest to highlight the impact of the lengthy waits for school places that is leaving children behind.

She told The Irish Sun: “I myself am autistic and I didn't get a suitable school place until I was 18.

“The detrimental impacts that not having the school places have, I don't think the Government will ever understand it.

“Provide the resources now. These autistic children and young people – it is not just affecting their social well-being, it is affecting their mental

Support ... McDonald

well-being, their family life. These amazing children are Irish citizens. They have a constitutional right to an education and I'm urging the Government to please listen.

“Please, please allocate these school places now.”

Anita Daynes from Tallaght in Dublin has been trying to find a special school place for her seven-year-old son Leighton, but has been repeatedly met with rejection.

Anita is part of the Equality in Education group run by parents that set up the protest and has been campaigning for more special school places across the country.

Anita was joined by her family at the protest, with Leighton's older brother Kallen, nine, telling The Irish Sun that the Government needs to step up to provide a school place for his brother.

Kallen said: “Just because he's autistic, doesn't make a dif-

ference. He's still the same as all of us.” Leighton – who is autistic and has a moderate intellectual disability – currently goes to a mainstream school with the help of an SNA, but teachers and doctors believe that he needs to be in a special school to thrive.

Anita told The Irish Sun: “If I have to go and buy a school chair and desk myself, he'll be going to one of these schools in September. I don't care what I have to do.

“They need to open a few more schools. We're one of the richest countries in the world and I have to fight for an education for my child. That is an absolute disgrace.”

One of the campaign organisers Charlotte Cahill – who is fighting for a school place for her daughter Cyra – told the protest that there are hundreds of children across the country who have no school place for this coming September.

The group met with Education Minister Helen McEntee and her officials last week, as the Govern-

ment tries to ensure there will be enough school places available.

Politicians from across the Dail attended the protest yesterday, including Mary Lou McDonald, Ivana Bacik, Pearse Doherty, Darren O'Rourke, David Cullinane, Rory Hearne, Ciaran Ahern, Gary Gannon and Paul Murphy.

The issue of special school places was raised with the Taoiseach inside the Dail yesterday. Michael Martin said every child has a right to an education and 372 extra special school classes would be sanctioned this year.

A Department of Education statement last night said: “The Department and Ministers McEntee and Moynihan are aware of the demonstration taking place today, due to the understandable concern of parents, and reaffirm their commitment to provide adequate school places for those with special educational needs.”

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School hope ... Kallen and Leighton