



Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2027

School Support Dog Grant Scheme

Submitted by Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland (AADI)

AADI is seeking Government partnership to scale a structured, quality-assured School Support Dog Programme that supports student wellbeing, emotional regulation, inclusion, attendance and access to learning.



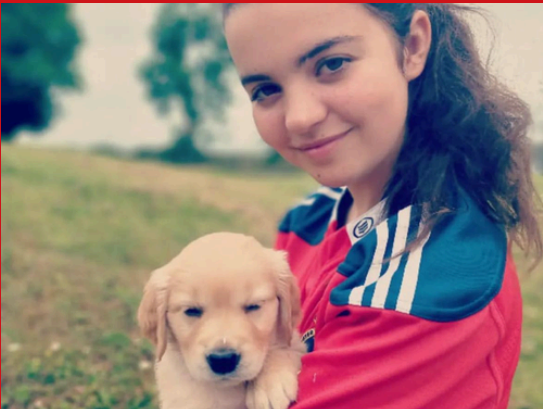
The Complexity Of Our Work

Providing autism assistance dog and school support dogs is a highly specialised process that requires a two-year production cycle:



BREEDING

Carefully planned litters bred for temperament, health, and aptitude.



PUPPY DEVELOPMENT

Fostered by volunteers, supervised by AADI Puppy Supervisors.



ADVANCED TRAINING

18–24 months of intensive socialisation and skills development.



QUALIFICATION & PLACEMENT

Dogs are placed with families & schools, providing ongoing support and training as needed.



AFTERCARE

Aftercare ensures that the dog and family or school adjust smoothly to their new life.

Impact at a glance



5000+

Students, Teachers & Families Supported



12

Schools Qualified



15

Schools In The Evaluation Process



70%

Reduction In Stress



77%

Increase In Safer Feeling In Schools



83%

Overall Weighted Impact Score

Executive Summary

Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland is seeking the establishment of a dedicated School Support Dog Grant Scheme within Budget 2027, supporting eight schools per year: six mainstream schools and two dedicated special schools.

The proposed scheme would fund the placement and maintenance of highly trained School Support Dogs in approved participating schools. Each placement would include a once-off €25,000 placement grant paid to AADI to cover breeding, training, assessment, matching, handler training and school integration support, alongside a €2,500 annual stipend paid to the school for eight years to support the day-to-day maintenance and welfare of the dog.

AADI proposes that the scheme is delivered through a blended Department of Education funding route. For the two dedicated special schools supported each year, the model could operate as an enhanced capitation add-on, recognising the additional practical supports required in specialist education settings. For the six mainstream schools supported each year, the model could operate as a targeted inclusion and wellbeing grant, prioritising schools with clear regulation, inclusion, attendance, transition and participation needs.

This is a modest, practical and accountable funding model. It allows Government to begin with a balanced annual cohort across both mainstream and specialist settings, while ensuring that dedicated special schools are included from the outset. It also allows for careful phased implementation, structured evaluation and future scaling based on evidence, capacity and demonstrated need.

Executive Summary

The Budget 2027 ask

Element	Proposed funding model
Initial annual roll-out	8 Schools per year
Annual school mix	6 mainstream schools and 2 dedicated special schools
Once-off placement grant	€25,000 per school, paid to AADI
Annual maintenance stipend	€2,500 per school, paid annually for 8 years
Year 1 Budget 2027 allocation required	€220,000
Delivery model	Blended funding route: enhanced capitation add-on for special schools and targeted inclusion/wellbeing grant for mainstream schools



The Policy Opportunity

Schools across Ireland are supporting students with increasingly complex wellbeing, regulation, inclusion, attendance and participation needs. These challenges are present in both mainstream and specialist education settings. They can affect a student's ability to enter the school building, settle into the day, manage transitions, remain in class, engage with learning and participate fully in school life.

AADI's School Support Dog Programme offers a practical, structured and quality-assured support that complements the work already being led by teachers, SNAs, school leaders and existing therapeutic and wellbeing supports. It is not a replacement for any professional role. It is an additional, carefully managed intervention that strengthens the conditions that make learning possible.

The programme is particularly relevant where anxiety, emotional regulation challenges, transition difficulties or school avoidance create barriers to participation. In mainstream schools, this may include students in autism classes, students with additional needs, or students whose attendance and engagement are affected by anxiety or dysregulation. In dedicated special schools, the programme can provide a structured whole-school support for students with more complex needs, while also strengthening the wider school environment.

The Policy Opportunity

The Department of Education currently identifies 139 schools within the broad categorisation of special schools supported by the NCSE, including 129 special schools, 7 hospital schools and 3 schools attached to CAMHS units. AADI proposes that two dedicated special schools are included in the scheme each year, alongside six mainstream schools selected on the basis of need, readiness and programme fit.

This balanced model gives Government a clear, modest and manageable pathway for implementation across both mainstream and specialist settings.



Why a Mixed School Model?

AADI recommends that the first phase of the School Support Dog Grant Scheme supports a mixed annual cohort of six mainstream schools and two dedicated special schools.

This reflects the reality that regulation, anxiety, transition difficulties, attendance barriers and inclusion needs are present across the education system. A School Support Dog can be a valuable support in a mainstream setting where students may need help with arrival routines, transitions, calm-space resets, emotional regulation and re-entry to class. The programme can also provide meaningful support in dedicated special schools, where students may have more complex and ongoing regulation, communication, sensory or participation needs.

A mixed model would allow the Government to test the programme across both mainstream and specialist environments, while ensuring that dedicated special schools are included from the outset. It would also strengthen the evidence base by allowing AADI and the Department to understand how the model works in different school contexts, what implementation supports are required, and where the greatest impact is being achieved.

This approach is also practical. It avoids creating a large-scale entitlement before the programme has been further evaluated at national level, while still creating a clear annual pathway for growth. It gives the Government a controlled, evidence-informed pilot that can be reviewed and expanded over time.

A Structured and Quality-Assured Programme

AADI's School Support Dog Programme is not simply the placement of a dog in a school. It is a structured, end-to-end model designed to ensure safe, ethical and effective delivery.

Programme stage	What this provides
1. Ethical breeding and puppy development	Dogs are bred and raised within AADI's structured programme, with welfare and suitability considered from the earliest stage.
2. Behavioural assessment	Dogs are assessed for temperament, confidence, recovery, adaptability and suitability for school environments.
3. Specialist School Support Dog training	Training focuses on calm classroom behaviour, emotional regulation support, public access skills, structured interaction and welfare.
4. School selection and assessment	Schools are assessed for suitability, safety, readiness, handler capacity and welfare requirements.
5. Matching and handler training	Dogs are matched carefully to schools and handlers receive training in routines, welfare, safeguarding and positive handling.
6. School integration and aftercare	AADI supports integration, follow-up visits, mentoring, annual review, refresher training and welfare monitoring.

The model is designed to support both student outcomes and dog welfare. It ensures that every placement is delivered with clear standards, strong school preparation, ongoing support and accountability.

Evidence and Data Gathered to Date

AADI has gathered emerging evidence from schools currently participating in the School Support Dog Programme and from schools still awaiting placement. This data provides both evidence of early impact and a clear picture of unmet need across school communities.

The most recent AADI impact analysis brought together responses from 10 schools currently hosting a School Support Dog and 13 schools on the waiting list. The results show strong early outcomes across wellbeing, emotional regulation, inclusion, staff confidence and access to learning.

Headline data

Outcome area	Result	What this means
Overall weighted impact score	83%	Strong early evidence of programme value across participating schools
Wellbeing and emotional regulation	89%	Strong and consistent gains in regulation, safety and emotional settling
Inclusion and social connection	84%	Improved belonging, participation and peer connection
Staff confidence and delivery	85%	Strong implementation confidence and perceived programme value
Attendance and engagement	72%	Positive emerging gains, particularly for students facing anxiety-related barriers
Composite need among waiting-list schools	88%	Clear evidence of unmet need for additional regulation supports

Evidence and Data Gathered to Date

What the data tells us

The strongest early evidence is in the areas of wellbeing, emotional regulation and staff confidence. This is important because these are the foundations that allow many students to access the school day.

The programme is also showing positive emerging results in attendance and engagement. This is expected to be a longer-horizon outcome, particularly where school avoidance and anxiety are complex and established.

Schools report that School Support Dogs are being used in practical and purposeful ways: structured arrival routines, transition support, calm-space resets, supported re-entry to class and emotional regulation support.

The findings suggest that School Support Dogs are helping students to feel calmer, safer and more connected, supporting smoother transitions, stronger participation and better access to learning for children who may otherwise struggle to engage with the school day.

The programme is not claiming that a dog alone improves academic results. The evidence gathered to date is stronger and more precise: School Support Dogs improve the conditions that make learning possible - regulation, safety, attendance, participation, classroom climate and access to the school day.

Proposed Funding Mechanism

A School Support Dog Grant Scheme: blended Department funding model

AADI proposes that the School Support Dog Grant Scheme is delivered through a blended funding model that reflects the two types of schools included in the proposed annual roll-out.

For the two dedicated special schools supported each year, the scheme could be delivered as an enhanced capitation add-on, recognising that these settings already require additional resources to support students with complex needs.

For the six mainstream schools supported each year, the scheme could be delivered as a targeted inclusion and wellbeing grant, prioritising schools where there is clear evidence of need in areas such as emotional regulation, transitions, attendance, participation, inclusion and access to learning.

This blended model gives the Department flexibility while keeping the scheme ring-fenced, accountable and clearly linked to student need.



Proposed Funding Mechanism

Why this funding model is appropriate

- It is practical. The model separates the once-off placement cost from the ongoing school maintenance cost, ensuring that both AADI and participating schools are properly supported.
- It is targeted. Schools would not receive funding automatically. Places would be approved based on need, readiness, suitability and AADI's assessment and matching process.
- It is accountable. The €25,000 placement grant is linked directly to AADI's full production, training and placement pathway, while the annual stipend is ring-fenced for dog maintenance and welfare.
- It is inclusive. The model supports both mainstream and special school settings, reflecting the fact that regulation, inclusion, attendance and wellbeing needs exist across the education system.

It is scalable. The scheme can begin with eight schools per year and expand only when capacity, evidence and Government priorities support further growth.



THANK YOU

AADI would like to thank the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for considering this submission as part of the Budget 2027 process.

We recognise the many competing demands on public expenditure and have designed this proposal as a modest, phased and accountable funding model. The School Support Dog Grant Scheme offers Government a practical route to invest in student wellbeing, regulation, inclusion and access to learning, while building evidence over time and controlling future cost commitments.

AADI would welcome the opportunity to engage further with officials, the Department of Education and Youth, and the NCSE on how this proposal could be implemented in a way that is clear, measurable and aligned with existing education funding pathways.

With sincere thanks,

Nuala Geraghty
CEO
Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland
087 799 8179
nuala@aadi.ie
www.aadi.ie

