Prior to 1998 children with autism in Ireland were not recognised as a distinct group for educational provision and were likely to receive a school placement based on an accompanying condition. However, this appeared to change with a government announcement in November 1998 by then Minister for Education and Skills, Micheál Martin which stated that there would now be “formal recognition of the distinct educational needs of all children with Autism whose condition so requires the introduction of a special pupil teacher ratio of 6:1 for such children, together with an automatic entitlement to child care support”1. Over the years parents of children with autism had taken court cases to try and force the Irish State to provide appropriate educational provision for their children.

The Minister noted that the Irish education system had “lacked the flexibility necessary to respond to the individual requirements of special needs children” but that now “up-to-date data will be available to the department to ensure that every special needs child is responded to”.2

One indication of this new flexibility was the Minister’s decision to sanction funding for a pilot ABA school which would educate children with autism through employing the principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). By 2004 the number of funded ABA ‘pilot’ schools in the Republic of Ireland had grown to twelve, this number was expected to increase and the future looked promising for educational provision for children with autism.

However, rather than grow from this point the ABA schools came under fire as the Department of Education (DES) adopted a policy of ‘eclectic’ provision for children with autism, a provision with no research evidence of effectiveness delivered by teachers not required to have any understanding of or any qualifications in the area of autism spectrum disorders. This was particularly driven through by the 2004-2008 Education Minister Mary Hanafin who decided that there was no evidence available to suggest that ABA was more effective than other interventions for children with autism.3 Although the Minister’s assertion was robustly challenged at the time4 and there is no peer reviewed research evidence in publication to support the assertion that an ‘eclectic’ approach to the education of children with autism is equal or superior to approaches based upon the principles of behavioural analysis5 the Minister maintained her position, a position maintained by the Department of Education to this day.

Despite spending over €70m on the pilot ABA schools, the DES decided to shut them down, with no evaluation carried out, no report produced.

- Why would the DES not want to evaluate a system that it had spent so much money on? What might the evidence have said? Was it fearful of what the evidence might say?
- Why would it get rid of evidence based provision for children with autism and replace it with a model that is unproven, not evidence based? Was this done in the interests of vulnerable children or vested interests?

Speaking in February 2008 former Minister for Education Mary O’Rourke said she would like to see an open approach to the greater provision of Applied Behaviour Analysis for children with autism and she accused her former Department of having a “lingering animosity” towards ABA and that “the door is not fully open within the Department of Education to the idea of embracing ABA, as I

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2 Ibid


said, in a full blooded way."

Speaking in that same month Brian Hayes, Minister of State for Public Service Reform in the current government, said that he believed that the Government was obliged to provide the model of education identified as most suitable for each pupil and that "if it shows on a professional basis that ABA is the model for that particular child, I believe we have a constitutional responsibility to provide that model of education."

Speaking in that same month Ireland’s current Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn, in defence of the right of children with autism to professional ABA provision stated:

“The Department of Education and Science’s refusal to recognise the merit of the ABA method has more to do with institutional rigidities and conservatism within the civil service than a real honest and open evaluation of the effectiveness of the ABA method...We urge the Minister for Education [Mary Hanafin] to recognise the error of her ways and to take courage in her personal judgement and not be bullied by teachers’ interests and civil service conservatism.”

As parents of children with autism fought to keep the ABA schools open with over 4,000 supporters signing a petition the current Minister for Health, Dr. James Reilly, rallied to their side claiming that parents were “being bullied” by the State and that they were right to fight. When in opposition the current Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland, Eamon Gilmore, said that he would support the right of children with autism to ABA.

However, now that Mssrs. Quinn, Reilly, Hayes and Gilmore are in government they have abandoned their support of children with autism and today, Quinn now quotes the ‘official line’ that he criticised so heavily when in opposition.

Why have they abandoned children with autism and denied them the right to ABA? Why has Ireland, when it stood on the cusp of making a great advance, turned back the clock? Why, almost twenty years after we had a Minister for Education stressing the need for “up to date data” is the current government following the example of its predecessor and pointedly ignoring the “data”, the depth of international research that supports the effectiveness of ABA as an intervention for children with ASD as reflected in reports such as Maine and the National Standards Project?

Was Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn right? Has he sold out children with autism and become an evidence denier, wilting in the face of “civil service conservatism” and “bullied by teachers’ interests”?

Ireland’s last ABA school, kept going by a group of dedicated parents and ABA professionals, ran out of funds and closed its doors on July 29th 2011. What a shame. What a shame if that proves to be the last word, that ignorance prevails over evidence and children with autism are denied that most basic of human rights, the right to an appropriate education.