



Submission to the DARE Review

From The Spelling Alliance of Ireland

The Spelling Alliance of Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the DARE Review as a Disabled Persons Organisation representing nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking people, including spellers (those using low-tech AAC such as letterboards and typing) and their families.

Our submission focuses particularly on the experiences of nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students, many of whom have been historically under-heard, underestimated, and excluded from meaningful access to education.

We believe DARE is an important scheme. Reduced-points access can make a real difference for disabled students whose school experience has negatively affected their Leaving Certificate results and progression to higher education.

This submission is informed by feedback from nonspeaking young adults who use Spelling to Communicate as their primary communication method, alongside the wider experience of families and practitioners connected to The Spelling Alliance of Ireland.

A note on scope

We recognise that many of the issues raised in this submission relate to wider education access for nonspeaking and unreliably speaking students, including communication access, age-appropriate curriculum, assessment, examination pathways and school expectations.

We understand that these wider issues do not sit wholly within the remit of the DARE Review. DARE cannot, by itself, resolve the barriers that nonspeaking students may have faced throughout primary and secondary education.

However, these barriers are directly relevant to DARE. If a student has been denied meaningful access to education or exams, their school record and points profile may not reflect their ability, potential or need for access support.

Our concern is that DARE may unintentionally exclude students because they have already been excluded elsewhere. For nonspeaking and unreliably speaking students, fairness may

require more than reduced points. It may require alternative evidence, flexible pathways, and recognition that communication access is fundamental to educational access.

Question 1

DARE helps students whose disability has negatively affected their experience in school by providing access to college through reduced-points entry. How effectively do you think the current DARE process achieves this, and do you believe it is fair to all students? Why?

DARE is effective for some disabled students, particularly those who have been able to access the Leaving Certificate pathway, sit exams, receive appropriate documentation, and demonstrate educational impact within the current system.

However, we do not believe the current process is fair to all students.

For nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students, the issue is often much more fundamental than reduced points. Many students in this community have not had fair access to education in the first place. They may have been presumed to lack understanding because they could not speak reliably. They may have been placed on non-academic pathways. They may not have been offered age-appropriate curriculum, meaningful academic instruction, suitable assessments, or exam access.

One speller put the issue clearly:

“Does opportunity for this [DARE] include nonspeakers who have had no access to education? If not, then is it fair?”

This question goes to the heart of the problem. A scheme based primarily on reduced points can only support students who have had a fair opportunity to earn points. For students who have been denied access to education, exams, and communication, reduced-points entry may not help at all.

Another recently graduated speller described this exclusion directly:

“I have no education and I have not sat any exams so I do not have any points at all. But I am rearing to study. So does DARE help me? Can DARE help me?”

This highlights a serious gap in the current system. Some disabled students do not simply need a lower points threshold. They need an alternative way to demonstrate readiness, potential, and entitlement to further and higher education.

We are particularly concerned that nonspeaking students are often affected by what the same speller described as:

“the faulty assumption that a nonspeaker is automatically also cognitively disabled”

This assumption can have lifelong consequences. It can affect access to curriculum, expectations, assessment, school placement, transition planning, and future opportunities. If the DARE process relies too heavily on existing school records and points-based pathways, it may reproduce those historic injustices rather than correct them.

Our view is that DARE is valuable, but it is not yet fair to all students. It must evolve to recognise students whose disability affected not only their grades, but their entire access to communication, education, assessment and opportunity.

Question 2

From your experience as a disability organisation: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the DARE scheme and how it is currently operated?

Strengths

The main strength of DARE is that it recognises, in principle, that disability can have a significant impact on educational opportunity and outcomes. This recognition matters.

DARE also provides a structured national route into higher education for eligible disabled students. For students who can access the Leaving Certificate pathway and meet minimum course requirements, reduced-points entry can be life-changing.

The scheme also helps to make disability access more visible within the college admissions system. It sends an important message that disabled students should not be judged only by points where disability has affected their school experience.

These strengths should be protected.

Weaknesses

The central weakness, from our perspective, is that DARE appears to assume that students have already had meaningful access to education, exams, guidance, documentation, and the points system.

For many nonspeaking and unreliably speaking students, that is not the case.

One speller typed:

“As I have never actually been a student in the system, I have no idea how it is operated but in reality, this is a major weakness because it is another example of how we are excluded instead of included.”

This is a powerful point. If a student has been denied access to the traditional curriculum within the mainstream education system, or has never been supported to participate in it meaningfully, then they are also excluded from schemes designed around that system.

A second major weakness is the reliance on conventional evidence. School records, exam histories, educational impact statements and professional documentation may not accurately reflect the abilities or needs of nonspeaking students. In some cases, school records may reflect low expectations, lack of access to communication, or inappropriate educational provision.

For our community, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. A lack of exam results does not mean a lack of ability. A lack of age-appropriate schoolwork does not mean a lack of capacity. A lack of school-based documentation may reflect the failure of systems around the student, not the student's potential.

A third weakness is that the current model may not adequately recognise complex communication needs. Nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students may use AAC, typing, spelling, letterboards or communication partners. Their communication may be slow, effortful, motor-dependent, or reliant on trained support. These students need to be understood within the DARE process.

A fourth weakness is that DARE is primarily attached to the standard Leaving Certificate and points-based pathway. For students who were never given fair access to that pathway, reduced points may not be meaningful.

As one speller typed:

“DARE cannot help me access age appropriate education.”

This shows that the gap is not only at the point of college entry. The gap begins earlier, when students are not given access to appropriate education, communication and assessment. DARE cannot fix all of those wider failures on its own, but it should not ignore them either.

Question 3

The reduced-points offering within DARE is a significant support for eligible students. The Review Group is keen to ensure that the students who qualify are those who need the support most. We are also conscious of making the scheme easier to navigate and reducing unnecessary administration for students, parents, guidance counsellors and colleges. With this in mind, what changes would you make to the scheme to make it fairer for all students and easier to navigate for the next generation of disabled students?

We recommend that DARE be expanded and improved so that it can support students whose educational experiences do not fit neatly into the existing points-based model.

Our key recommendation is simple:

Find a way to include nonspeakers.

This was many of our spellers' central recommendation, and we believe it should be taken seriously as a direct call for wider systemic change.

One made a similar recommendation:

"To make it accessible to us nonspeakers. It needs to be based on something other than points."

We strongly agree.

1. Create an alternative evidence route

DARE should include an alternative evidence route for students whose school records, exam results or points do not accurately reflect their capacity because of lack of communication access, lack of appropriate education, low expectations, inappropriate placement, or systemic exclusion.

This route could include:

- communication access reports;
- AAC, typing or spelling-based evidence;
- portfolios of student work;
- evidence from tutors, practitioners or home education settings;
- reports from communication practitioners;
- statements from families, advocates or disability organisations;
- video or documented evidence of academic engagement;
- evidence of independent learning;
- and other non-traditional forms of proof.

This would make the scheme fairer for students whose abilities have not been properly captured by the school system.

2. Develop pathways beyond reduced points

Reduced points are important, but they are not enough for students who have no points because they were never given fair access to exams.

DARE should consider additional pathways such as:

- portfolio-based admission;
- foundation or access programmes;
- supported transition routes;
- course-readiness assessments;

- flexible entry routes for students with complex communication needs;
- recognition of non-traditional learning;
- and preparatory academic pathways for disabled students who have been excluded from standard routes.

The question should not only be, “How many points did this student receive?”

For some students, the fairer question is:

“What evidence do we have that this student could engage with this course if the right communication, educational and access supports were in place?”

3. Explicitly recognise nonspeaking and unreliably speaking students

DARE should explicitly recognise nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students, including those who use AAC, typing, spelling, letterboards or communication partners.

This recognition should include an understanding that:

- speech is not the same as intelligence;
- unreliable speech is not the same as unreliable thinking;
- motor planning differences can affect communication and assessment;
- lack of speech should not lead to automatic assumptions of cognitive disability;
- communication access is an educational access issue;
- students must be presumed competent unless there is strong evidence otherwise.

4. Provide training for DARE assessors and participating institutions

Those involved in assessing DARE applications should receive training on complex communication needs, nonspeaking autism, apraxia, unreliable speech, AAC, motor planning, sensory regulation, and presuming competence.

Without this, there is a risk that the same assumptions that excluded students from education will also exclude them from access schemes.

Training should also be available to guidance counsellors, access officers and admissions staff so that students with complex communication needs are not left dependent on whether an individual school or college happens to understand them.

5. Reduce administrative barriers

The DARE process should be easier for families and students to navigate, particularly those already managing complex disability-related systems.

Improvements could include:

- plain-English guidance;
- accessible video explanations;

- examples of acceptable alternative evidence;
- a named contact point for complex cases;
- earlier guidance before Leaving Certificate year;
- a pre-application advice process;
- and clear information for families whose child may not have a traditional school or exam record.

The students who need DARE most may also be the least likely to have straightforward paperwork, strong school advocacy or easy access to professional documentation.

6. Include nonspeaking people and Disabled Persons Organisations in ongoing governance

This review should not be a one-off consultation. Disabled students and Disabled Persons Organisations should be involved in the ongoing design, monitoring and evaluation of DARE.

In particular, nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking people must not only be spoken about. They must be supported to contribute directly, using whatever communication methods and supports they require.

The future of disability access to education should be shaped by those who have experienced exclusion most directly.

Conclusion

The Spelling Alliance of Ireland supports the purpose of DARE and recognises the value of reduced-points entry for many disabled students.

However, DARE must now go further.

For nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students, the central issue is often not simply that disability affected their points. It is that they were never given fair access to communication, education, assessment or points in the first place.

A fair access scheme must recognise those students too.

To make DARE fairer for the next generation of disabled students, we recommend:

1. an alternative evidence route for students whose school records do not reflect their ability or need;
2. explicit recognition of nonspeaking, minimally speaking and unreliably speaking students;
3. pathways beyond reduced points for students without fair access to exams;
4. training on complex communication needs for assessors, guidance counsellors and institutions;
5. reduced administrative barriers for students and families;

6. and ongoing involvement of disabled students, nonspeaking people and Disabled Persons Organisations in the future development of DARE.

Reduced points matter. But fairness must also mean communication access, alternative evidence, flexible pathways, and a willingness to recognise students whose potential was never properly documented by the school system.

Nonspeaking students should not be excluded from DARE because they were already excluded from education.

They deserve a route in.