Evaluation of Schools at High Support Units, Special Care Units, and Child Detention Centres

REPORT

Ballydowd Special Care School
Ballyowen, Palmerstown, Dublin 20

Roll Number: 20390E

Date of evaluation: 24 November 2015
Introduction

Ballydowd Special Care School provides education for the residents committed to the care of the Ballydowd Special Care Unit. The school caters for the needs of ten students, ranging from thirteen to eighteen years of age. The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills conducted an unannounced evaluation of Ballydowd Special Care School in November 2015. The evaluation included observation of teaching and learning, a teacher survey and interviews with students, staff and management. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

The following are the key findings:

- The principal demonstrates very good leadership and managerial skills and he ensures that school activities are organised efficiently. There is a high level of cooperation and communication between the residential director and the principal in addressing students’ educational, care and safety needs.
- While the school has demonstrated some success in increasing the number of students with access to a full school timetable, it is recommended that continued efforts be made to improve the attendance of students on reduced timetables and of those students who wish to return to the residences during the school day.
- Teachers interact positively with the students during most lessons and they strive to motivate students and to affirm their work. Students engage particularly well in lessons where active learning methodologies and concrete resources are used.
- The overall quality of teaching, learning and student attainment is good in the range of subjects taught, with some examples of very good teaching observed. The school’s success in supporting a number of students through the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations in recent years is commendable.
- While there is a very good process in place to design individual educational plans (IEPs) for each student, there is scope to express learning targets in more specific and measurable language.

The following main recommendations are made:

- As a matter of priority, it is recommended that the management and staff continue to reflect upon and implement strategies to improve the attendance of students on reduced timetables and of students seeking to return to the residences during the school day.
- There is scope to improve the clarity and purpose of some targets in the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students by using more specific and measurable language to describe the intended learning outcomes for the students and to guide implementation at classroom level.

1. The quality of teaching, learning and support for students

1.1 Teaching, learning and attainment

The overall quality of teaching, learning and student attainment is good with some examples of very good teaching observed. Students are timetabled for lessons in Mathematics, English, Art, Technology, Woodwork, Home Economics, Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE), Business Studies and Information Technology. There was no provision for Physical Education (PE) or Music at the time of the evaluation and students expressed disappointment with this lack of provision.
Four lessons are scheduled for each time slot throughout the school day and students are instructed individually or in small groups for each lesson. Teachers interact positively with the students during the lessons and they make commendable efforts to motivate students and to affirm their work. Students engaged particularly well in lessons where active learning methodologies and concrete resources were used.

Lessons were observed and evaluated across a broad sample of the school’s provision. Teachers prepare appropriate plans to guide tuition for each student through a range of FETAC and Junior Certificate courses. It is very praiseworthy that, in the last school year, one student achieved well in the Leaving Certificate and six students successfully sat the Junior Certificate examination.

1.2 Literacy and numeracy
Competent teaching was observed in lessons for literacy and numeracy. In lessons where students were motivated and actively engaged there was evidence of good progress in their learning.

Teaching in English is focused appropriately on the development of functional literacy skills and on the extension of vocabulary for each student. The display of subject-specific vocabulary and students’ work in a number of classrooms is useful in promoting literacy skills and it is recommended that this practice be extended to all settings.

Lessons in Mathematics are presented effectively through a variety of approaches to encourage and increase students’ involvement. While some students are working on modules for FETAC certification, many others are working on practical mathematical activities and games linked to real life.

1.3 Life skills
The principal and the teachers demonstrate commitment to providing students with a range of useful and relevant life skills. While some students exhibit a range of social and behavioural needs, the availability of practical subjects is very important for engaging students in school life and for enabling the development of practical skills. The school successfully uses these subjects to motivate the attendance of students and to encourage their co-operation with school and safety rules.

In lessons observed, students engaged well with activities in Art, Computers, Woodwork and Home Economics. Samples of students’ work in these areas are of a high quality and are displayed to affirm students’ efforts.

1.4 Educational progression
The principal and teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the learning needs, aspirations and educational capabilities of students in their care. The school’s success in supporting a number of students through the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations in recent years is commendable. The school is committed to affirming and celebrating students’ achievements through certification and development of useful life skills.

Students are enrolled from a variety of educational and other backgrounds. The school communicates well with the residential care home, professional agencies and the assessment, care and therapy service (ACTS) to identify students’ social, emotional and educational needs and to implement support interventions.

There is a very good process in place to design IEPs for each student. The IEPs are devised collaboratively and accurate baselines are established by reference to assessment information. While targets are outlined in all IEPs, there is scope to improve the clarity and purpose of some targets by making them more specific and measurable in order to describe the intended learning outcomes for the students and to guide implementation at classroom level.
2. The quality of school organisation and management

2.1 General management and operation of the school

Ballydowd Special Care School currently operates under the patronage of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and it is envisaged that the patronage will be formally transferred to the local Education and Training Board (ETB). The Director of the Residential Centre combines his residential duties with his responsibilities as Chairperson of the Board of Management very effectively. The board meets frequently and there is a high level of co-operation and communication between the Director and the Principal in addressing students’ educational, care and safety needs. The board and the principal articulated their concerns about funding levels and the challenge for the school in increasing students’ full attendance.

The principal presents as a committed advocate for the students’ learning and welfare needs and he expresses a very caring vision for the school community. He demonstrates very good leadership and managerial skills and he ensures that school activities are organised efficiently. In response to the Inspectorate survey, all teachers expressed satisfaction with the school’s management processes, the initial assessment of students and communication within the school. A majority of teachers expressed concern at the behaviour of students and at the school’s difficulty in providing a broader curriculum and additional supports for students.

2.2 Attendance and retention

While attendance is monitored very carefully at whole-school and classroom level, there is scope to improve overall student attendance. Although school policies outline the objective of achieving high attendance for all students, it is reported that the difficult behaviour of a number of students is hindering their full attendance. It is recommended that a self-evaluation approach be implemented to examine students’ dispositions and attitudes to school and to explore further adaptation of teaching approaches to encourage attendance.

At the time of the evaluation, a minority of students were on a reduced timetable due to health and safety concerns. Some of these students are being encouraged back to school and are accompanied to school by residential staff to ensure their safe engagement with school. While most students have access to full timetables, some students ask to return to the residence during the school day. As a matter of priority, it is recommended that the management and staff continue to reflect upon and implement strategies to improve the attendance of students on reduced timetables and of students seeking to return to the residences during the school day.

2.3 Child protection

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

3. The quality of school planning and school self-evaluation

3.1 Planning at whole-school, classroom and individual student levels

The quality of whole-school planning is good and policies are reviewed regularly to reflect the school’s context and priorities. Good quality administrative plans guide a wide range of school activities and procedures very effectively. Subject plans provide valuable direction for the range of educational programmes implemented in the school.
Good quality classroom planning was noted in the lessons observed. In the majority of plans objectives are identified and commendable attention is given to differentiating content to include the social and educational needs of individual students.

3.2 The school's capacity for self-evaluation and improvement

The school’s capacity for self-evaluation and improvement is very good. The principal has provided very strong leadership in analysing and implementing recommendations from previous evaluations. The school has been particularly successful in encouraging students to attain certification for their education through the State Examinations and FETAC.

School Improvement Plans have been devised collaboratively through reflection and analysis of evidence and clear targets have been identified for improvements in Literacy and Numeracy. While the school has demonstrated some success in increasing the number of students with access to a full school timetable, it is recommended that continued efforts be made to improve the attendance of students on reduced timetables and of those students who wish to return to the residences during the school day.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the report, its content and recommendations, and is very pleased with same. The School – BOM will endeavour, in so far as possible, to act on the report and its recommendations for the enhancement of educational provision to our young people. The principal and BOM are committed to providing a holistic, educational and Therapeutic centre of restorative intent in Ballydowd.

Part B: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

1. Music and Art have been added to the timetable in an effort to improve any attendance not related to Health and Safety, which is the main cause of non-attendance, where it arises.
2. IEPs have been made more target specific in line with our co-located clinical colleagues we work alongside Education Support staff. Reviews are done every four weeks and signed off by the IEP co-ordinator.