SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following an evaluation of the provision for students with special educational needs in Coláiste Bríde, Enniscorthy carried out as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the provision and of the teaching and learning for students with special educational needs and makes recommendations for further development in this area in the college. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed college planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and members of the special educational needs team. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Bríde is allocated the equivalent of forty-eight teaching hours for learning support and resource teaching. An additional seventy-three teaching hours have been allocated to support thirty-one students with low and high incidence category special needs such as sensory and physical disabilities, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and general and specific learning disabilities. The principles of inclusion and equality of access and participation are highlighted in the college’s admissions policy as informing the work of the board of management. In this policy the board assuredly declares a welcome for students with special educational needs. As this policy is due for review this year, it would be timely for the board to consider rewording a phrase in the document that might be misinterpreted as restricting that welcome, contrary to the positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with diverse needs apparent in a range of observable practices in the college.

The college is pro-active in gathering information on incoming students with special educational needs, working with their special educational needs organiser to access required resources, and in ensuring a smooth transition to second-level education. All first year students are placed in mixed-ability classes on the basis of the results of school-based testing with reference to the information collected during the enrolment process. This form of organisation remains in place through the junior cycle. However, each year in the junior cycle, eight to ten of the lowest achieving students, are placed in two classes from which they are withdrawn for their English and mathematics instruction with the learning support teacher. This occurs too early in their second-level school career and is not in keeping with the principles of inclusion. It is strongly recommended that this practice be discontinued, particularly for first year students. The college should plan instead to support these students in their mixed-ability classes through alternative means of provision such as a combination of differentiation and co-operative teaching. In
addition, those students who have an exemption from the study of Irish can continue to be timetabled to receive specific interventions in literacy or numeracy at these times.

The college’s special educational needs policy was first created in 2008 and revised in 2011. It clearly states the aims of the provision as well as providing information on the various staff roles. The policy usefully outlines the models of provision employed by the college including individual and small group withdrawal lessons, and co-operative teaching. The policy also notes the college’s procedures in relation to identifying students and monitoring, evaluating, assessing and reporting their progress. There is good evidence that all students are in receipt of their allocated resources and that all students have access to all subjects including a modern foreign language. At senior cycle, students have the option of applying for a place in the Transition Year programme or pursuing the established Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme. Senior students with special educational needs continue to receive support as required through a withdrawal model or during Irish class, if they are exempt from the study of Irish.

Three key teachers who hold suitable post-graduate qualifications are timetabled to deliver most of the college’s support teaching. An ex-quota learning support teacher is responsible for the organisation, planning and instruction for the six set English and mathematics groups in the junior cycle while the college’s ex-quota resource teacher works assiduously as the co-ordinator of the provision of students in receipt of resource teaching hours. Her many duties include timetabling the students, conducting assessments, overseeing planning, disseminating information and managing resources as well as teaching. A final specialist teacher works collaboratively with the co-ordinator and shares some organising and planning responsibilities.

The remainder of the resource hours are allocated to eight teachers most of whom provide subject support in one or more of their specialist areas. The number of teachers involved in the provision is now eleven. This number should be kept to a minimum to facilitate collaboration, planning and professional development. The college is encouraged to factor all known resource hours into the timetable at the time of its construction to ensure that the students with significant needs are supported by teachers with the appropriate expertise and experience. It is also essential that the college create a spreadsheet to clearly show how all of the allocated resource and learning support hours are deployed to the benefit of the targeted students.

Each year a considerable number of enrolling students are identified with significant literacy difficulties. To strategically target these students for intervention, the college is recommended to develop a whole-school literacy policy. The members of the special educational needs team should engage with their colleagues and in particular the English teachers, to review current college practices and to initiate the development of an action plan to promote the development of literacy skills across the curriculum. This plan should ensure that all staff members focus on positive literacy outcomes for all students.

At the time of the evaluation, the college did not have a policy, or practices in place, to identify and support students who are gifted and talented. Nonetheless, staff had identified this as an area for development by the guidance and special needs departments and this is to be applauded. Future work in this area should be guided by the advice in the document *Gifted and Talented Pupils Guidelines for Teachers* (2007) published jointly by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The college employs one part-time and two full-time special needs assistants (SNAs) to provide care assistance to two students with physical disabilities and a student diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. The three SNAs hold appropriate qualifications. They carry out their duties
professionally and play an integral role in enabling inclusion. They are clear about their duties and responsibilities, particularly in relation to assisting curriculum access and promoting the independence of the students. These are outlined in the special educational needs policy. The college has good relations with, and receives positive support from their National Educational Psychological Services psychologist, their special educational needs organiser and the visiting teachers for the students who are deaf or visually-impaired. There are three dedicated resource rooms which accommodate the main work of the resource teachers. One is the co-ordinator’s classroom which also acts as a secure storage space for student files. A range of instructional materials and resources is available for the use of teachers. The positive disposition of the management regarding the purchase of additional materials was reported by staff.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The college is currently piloting a process for individual educational planning. The special educational needs teachers prepare a one-page document, referred to as an individual educational plan (IEP), for every student who is in receipt of resource teaching and efforts are made to elicit and include the views of the student and her parents in the process. The IEP document does serve as a student profile in stating each student’s strengths and areas of difficulty and identifying some long-term objectives and priority learning goals. However, it is recommended that the team review this process. The selection of who gets an IEP should be centred on each student’s level of need rather than on whether she attends for support. For the few with complex needs, it will be necessary to develop the current document with the addition of specific, measurable and time-bound targets designed to improve academic, social and behavioural, or communication skills. The development and implementation of these targets should be shared across the curriculum.

For the majority of students who have less complex needs, it will be sufficient to refine the present process so that resource teachers are provided with information about student abilities and needs but they, with the student, identify the learning needs that they will target for the term. This procedure might be facilitated by revising the college’s present student profile template. Student records should then show how these needs were met and with what success. The use of the college’s group IEP template as a planning instrument should be sufficient in situations where a group of students have similar learning needs.

Mainstream teachers are supported in their planning for students with special educational needs in a number of ways. They have access to background information on students and information on specific conditions in relevant publications of agencies such as the Special Educational Support Service (SESS), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) through the special educational needs team. The team is also available to respond to teacher requests for support. All college staff have benefited from presentations on inclusion from SESS and NEPS personnel. The college should now consider conducting an audit to determine the staff’s professional development needs in this area to ensure the future capacity of the staff to cope with the increasing numbers and needs of incoming students with additional needs. Topics such as differentiation, co-operative learning, co-operative teaching and inclusive planning should be borne in mind.

A review of department-level planning in relation to students with special educational needs in a number of subject areas showed it to be limited and in need of development. It is recommended that each subject department targets the needs of the students with special educational needs as a priority area for development. Each department should seek the advice and support of the special educational needs team to help them identify subject generic and subject specific strategies to ensure the full inclusion of all students. Subject departments should find the National Council for
The seven lessons observed during this evaluation were representative of the types of provision extended to students with special educational needs or who were in need of learning support, and included students of all year groups. The lessons were varied in nature and included direct instruction of literacy, small group subject instruction and subject support. The teachers were committed and professional in their work. The overall quality of teaching and learning in these lessons was judged to be good and, in some cases, very good. Examples of good practice were seen in lessons where planning was based on individual and specific student needs and where teachers started lessons by sharing the learning outcomes and ended by reviewing the outcomes with the students.

Many teachers focussed on skill development or on the consolidation and reinforcement of previously learned skills. In one lesson, active learning featured prominently as a group of students investigated probability through the use of playing cards and dice. Most teachers involved students through differentiated questioning, discussion and demonstration. The correct usage of subject specific vocabulary was stressed. Good student-teacher relations were seen in the mutual respect accorded to each. Teachers were patient and understanding and students verbalised their appreciation of the help and support they received. Students were co-operative and well-behaved. Most were actively engaged in learning.

The two resource teachers have recently piloted co-operative teaching as a model of support. In one lesson observed, a resource teacher and a subject teacher worked together to instruct and support a class of fifth year students. This was a fine example of team teaching with the lesson featuring whole-class and small group teaching as well as individual support. The teachers worked smoothly in tandem taking it in turns to lead or to play a subordinate but active role. It is recommended that the college staff work collaboratively to further develop this as an alternative form of provision for students with additional learning needs. Co-operative teaching draws on the strengths of both the subject teacher, who understands the structure, content, and pacing of the curriculum, and the resource teacher, who can identify the unique learning needs of individual students and enhance curriculum and instruction to match these needs. There are a variety of formats that can be used when two teachers work in the classroom and the college is advised to research this model of provision thoroughly and to plan and monitor the gradual expansion of its use within the college.

Some students have access to assistive technology in the form of college laptops. These are used to great effect by the students to record notes and to complete class work. However, the resource teachers have limited access to information and communications technology (ICT) for teaching and learning. ICT can provide a non-threatening environment in which the level and pace for learning can be set to suit individual needs and in which students can complete tasks independently. Software can offer graphics, sound effects and immediate rewards to help encourage students and provide needed stimulating repetition and practice. It is hoped this issue will be resolved by the recent awarding of a grant to the college.

ASSESSMENT

Aspects of assessment practice in Coláiste Bríde were under review at the time of this evaluation including changes to the instruments being used with entering students. Such a review is good practice. The Department publication Inclusion of Students with Special educational Needs...
(2007) and the NEPS publications A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers (2010) and Resource Pack for Teachers (2010) are good sources of information regarding the development of assessment policy and practice. The college’s NEPS psychologist has been particularly helpful in advising the college on the selection of appropriate assessment instruments. The college is reminded that effective practice at this initial stage will help in the identification of student’s past attainments and inform planning, but the results can also provide a database for analysis and tracking future student progress. In light of this, it is suggested that the college develop procedures on re-testing the literacy and numeracy skills of students periodically throughout their time in college as an additional means of measuring attainment.

Examinations of student class work in progress and work completed in copies and portfolios yielded positive evidence of participation and achievement. Resource teachers are asked by the special educational needs team to use a lesson review template to record the purpose of each lesson and the learning outcomes. It is suggested that the completed forms be collated monthly and filed in each student’s main file in the co-ordinator’s room. Together they will be a valuable asset in the monitoring of the overall quality of the provision and in the tracking of the progress of individual students.

The college actively supports eligible students and their parents in the applications for reasonable accommodations in the certificate examinations and endeavours to provide appropriate accommodations in college examinations. Some concern was expressed over the increasing numbers of students seeking accommodations in the junior certificate examinations and the college is advised to adhere strictly to the conditions laid down by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie) and the Framework of Principles published by the Expert Advisory Group on Certificate Examinations (2000) and the guidance given by their NEPS psychologist.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The college’s admission policy highlights the principles of inclusion and equality of access and declares a welcome for students with special educational needs.
- The college is pro-active in gathering information on incoming students with special educational needs.
- The college’s special educational needs policy clearly states the aims of the provision as well as providing information on the various staff roles and outlining the models of provision.
- Three key teachers, who hold suitable post-graduate qualifications, including the co-ordinator, are timetabled to deliver most of the college’s provision.
- The college is currently piloting a process for individual educational planning.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was judged to be good and, in some cases, very good.
- The two resource teachers have recently piloted co-operative teaching as a model of support.
- Aspects of assessment practice in Coláiste Bríde were under review at the time of this evaluation.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The practice of creating learning support English and mathematics classes in first year should be discontinued and the same practice in second and third year should be reviewed.
- The college should develop a whole-school literacy policy to strategically target students identified with significant literacy difficulties.
- It is recommended that the college review the current process for individual educational planning.
- Each subject department should review and develop its planning for the inclusion of students with special educational needs.
- It is recommended that the college further develop the practice of co-operative teaching as an alternative form of provision for students with additional learning needs.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with members of the special educational needs team at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

We would like to compliment the Inspector on his engagement with Senior Management, Special Education Team, staff, students and external agencies involved with Special Education in Coláiste Bríde, which ensured a very positive and beneficial experience for all involved. His support, experience and in-depth working knowledge of effective Inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs in mainstream education, is worthy of special mention.

The Board acknowledges the very many positive comments in the report and the identification of the main strengths which have been recognised. The board also welcomes the key recommendations for the further development of an effective Inclusive educational environment in Coláiste Bríde.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

All relevant partners have had an opportunity to read, review and discuss the inspection report. All recommendations are being carefully considered with a view to their implementation in the context of available resources. The S.E.N. team will be central to the implementation of this plan.

Since the report has been received, an action plan has been put in place and work has begun in the following areas:

- The practice of creating learning support English and Mathematics classes in first year has been discontinued. In-class support and co-operative teaching methods of support are being piloted in favour of the withdrawal method of support which had been previously used.
- The S.E.N. team in conjunction with the English department and our NEPS psychologist, Dr. T. Tierney, are in the process of developing a whole-school literacy policy.
- The process has begun to address the further development of the individual educational plan for students with low incidence needs.