

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs**  
**REPORT**

**Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's**  
**Navan, County Meath**  
**Roll number: 64370T**

**Date of inspection: 22 October 2010**



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F**  
**O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N**  
**A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING  
IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

---

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following an inspection in Loreto Secondary School, Navan, conducted 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 school. 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 school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, deputy principal and members of the special educational needs team.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Loreto Secondary School, Navan, is a Catholic voluntary secondary school providing post-primary education for girls living in the wider Navan area. The 2010-11 enrolment for the school is 777 students. For this academic year, the National Council for Special Education has allocated 51.5 teaching hours to support twenty-four students with identified low and high incidence needs. The school also has an allocation of twenty-six teaching hours to provide learning support. There is evidence that these supplemental teaching hours are being used appropriately to support students with specified needs.

The school's admissions policy declares support for the principles of inclusion and equality of access and participation in the school. The policy provides information which guides the enrolment of students, including those with special educational needs (SEN), and is fully compliant with legislation. However, the document's several references to the availability of additional resources from the Department of Education and Skills could be disconcerting to prospective applicants with special educational needs and should therefore be removed. The school should endeavour in all its policies and procedures to ensure that the school is not only welcoming, but actively seeking the inclusion of all students irrespective of ability or disability, or ethnic, social and economic background in accordance with the principles espoused by the Loreto trustees.

The school has assigned a teacher to act as the SEN co-ordinator. However, the extensive special educational needs' work carried out by the teacher is in addition to her post of responsibility role as year head. Although ably supported by the principal, this teacher carries a significant workload in relation to organising and overseeing the SEN provision, supporting her mainstream colleagues, and leading the SEN team. It is recommended that the school review the present arrangement and the related duties and responsibilities. When the next review of posts of responsibility takes place, the school should allocate a post of responsibility to this area. An alternative solution might be to share the responsibility between more than one post holder. For

example, one teacher might have responsibility for the students with special educational needs in the first-year cohort. Part of that responsibility should involve working with the first-year year head in gathering information on enrolling students, liaising with parents and feeder schools, and analysing the results of the entrance and any follow-up testing. A second teacher might take responsibility for the provision for the students in second and third year, while a third teacher co-ordinates the provision for the students in senior cycle.

The current co-ordinator works efficiently with a core team of teachers. The SEN co-ordinator and one of the SEN team hold post-graduate qualifications in the area of special education and a number of teachers providing resource hours have completed relevant online courses. The team meets once per term. This is not sufficient. Ideally, this team should meet weekly, or at least monthly. Successful provision depends on adequate time being allocated for planning and collaboration.

At the time of the evaluation, a large number of staff members were involved in providing resource and learning-support teaching. This situation makes collaboration difficult, limits the development of individual expertise through experience and professional development, and inhibits the sharing of resources. A significant amount of the additional teaching hours is devoted to subject support by subject specialists, often the student's own class teacher. It is suggested that an increase in the use of differentiated teaching practices in all mainstream classes and the extended deployment of co-teachers would be more inclusive uses of the allocated hours and would help to reduce the need for so many subject-support classes. Senior management should conduct an audit of the staff's professional development needs in these and other relevant areas to inform a long-term plan to build the capacity of all teaching staff. Students with considerable learning, social or emotional behavioural difficulties and those underachieving significantly in literacy or numeracy should continue to be withdrawn to attend for tuition with a qualified SEN teacher.

The school has established good routines to gather information on students at their point of transfer to the school. This process is led by the principal. There is good contact with the feeder primary schools and the parents of entering students. Prospective students sit school-based assessments in Irish and Mathematics as well as a standardised test of verbal ability. The results of these tests are used to inform the creation of mixed-ability, first-year class groups and are available to teachers for planning purposes.

In the junior cycle, the core subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics are set from first year. However, there is concurrent timetabling for these subjects. This is a good arrangement, as it allows movement. In first year, an additional teacher is assigned to the Mathematics band and in second and third year, additional teachers are available for both the English and Mathematics bands. These teachers are available to facilitate team teaching, to withdraw specific students for support or to form a smaller support class. This is good practice. In addition, any junior cycle students who are exempt from the study of Irish receive support teaching individually or in small groups. A small number of students in the junior cycle are permitted with parental consent to reduce their academic load by dropping a modern foreign language or Science. These students may study keyboarding skills at this time or receive additional support teaching.

Senior cycle students with resource hours who are exempt from the study of Irish attend for support or independent study at this time. Others are withdrawn from classes in consultation with their subject teachers.

It is common practice in the school to include students for whom English is an additional language, and who for this reason are exempt from the study of Irish, in support classes organised for students with learning difficulties. This is not an acceptable use of resource or learning-support hours and the practice should cease. Only students who have assessed learning difficulties should be included in such support classes.

Advice for mainstream teachers is provided informally on request by members of the SEN team. The co-ordinator has recently provided all resource teachers with a useful pack of information, including teaching tips regarding a range of learning difficulties and disabilities. The school has facilitated some relevant professional development for teachers in areas such as mixed-ability teaching and input on special educational needs by the school's National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) psychologist is planned for later in the year. The school should encourage and facilitate access by all teachers to online courses on topics such as inclusion, co-operative teaching as well as on specific disabilities and learning difficulties.

Teachers, whether planning inclusive education in mainstream classroom settings or planning for resource teaching require sufficient information regarding the strengths and needs of the targeted students. The current system of disseminating information based on informal contact with the SEN co-ordinator should be revised. Teachers would benefit from access to Special Education Support Service publications such as *Signposts: A Resource Pack for Teachers* (2008) and the Department's *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007).

The school has one special needs assistant who provides effective shared support to five students with low incidence needs.

The school acknowledges the supports provided to it by their Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), their NEPS psychologist and the visiting teachers who support students of the Travelling Community and students with hearing or visual impairments. These personnel currently liaise mainly with the principal. It is recommended that they have direct access to relevant teaching staff and special needs assistants as well as to the students concerned.

The SEN co-ordinator keeps accurate records of meetings with parents and professionals. These and all records containing student information, test results and medical and psychological reports are kept secure in the co-ordinator's office or in the school's main office. There is only a limited range of teaching resources available to support students with additional learning needs. An inventory of existing appropriate materials should be made and distributed to all teachers. The materials should be centrally located and easily accessible to all teachers. Future purchases of materials and software should be guided by teachers' needs. This could be informed by a school audit of the resource needs of the staff assigned to resource teaching and learning support.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The whole-school plan contains several sections written by the principal and the SEN co-ordinator which efficiently outline the school's procedures for identifying students with special educational needs, keeping records, and planning and organising the provision for these students. The existing SEN policy is due for review. Such a review process should further develop the policy to include information on how the SEN team works with and supports mainstream subject teachers to enable inclusion in all classrooms. The policy should also outline how student

progress in literacy, numeracy and other targeted areas is monitored and how outcomes are measured and recorded, how discontinuation of learning support is determined, and how students and parents are involved and kept informed of progress.

It is recommended that the school review and reconfigure all of the whole-school plan's references to students requiring additional supports into a whole-school policy for inclusion. A whole-school policy should address measures to support not only students with recognised special educational needs but those students from the Traveller community, those for whom English is an additional language and those requiring learning support. The school should also consider how planning for inclusion might take a more centralised position in whole-school planning including the professional development and deployment of teachers and the factoring in of all known additional resource hours into the timetable at the time of its construction. The review process might begin with an examination of current school practices regarding the goal of inclusion. Documents such as the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (Department of Education and Skills, 2007) and the recently published *A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2010) will be of assistance in this exercise.

There is no reference in the whole-school plan to students who are academically gifted or exceptionally talented and this should be addressed when the plan is next reviewed as well as in future discussions regarding school development. A useful resource is *The Gifted and Talented Pupils Guidelines for Teachers* (2007) available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

To support lesson planning, all teachers timetabled for resource or learning-support hours are asked to complete student record forms for each of their students. The form is used to make a note of relevant information on the student to inform planning and to record work completed. This form has the potential to be more useful for planning purposes. It is recommended that the SEN team develop the existing student record form into a more extensive individual student profile and learning programme template to guide the planning of all support classes for the students with identified low and high incidence disabilities through target setting and monitoring of expected student learning outcomes. The content of the expanded individual student profile and learning programme, and particularly the learning targets should be discussed with the students and their parents or guardians.

The quality of subject planning in the area of special educational needs was variable, but generally poor and in need of development. All subject teams should meet to reconsider what planning and preparation for the inclusion of all students means for their subject area. The advice of the SEN team should be sought. Both planning and teaching would benefit from the considerable advice available in the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007).

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Eight lessons were selected for observation during the course of the inspection. These were predominantly small group and individual subject-support classes provided by subject specialists but classes targeting literacy development and a mainstream mathematics lesson were also visited.

The overall quality of teaching and learning in these classrooms was good to very good. The purpose of most of the support classes was to provide additional understanding and revision of mainstream lessons, but work also focused on the development of subject-specific language and vocabulary and the practice of specific subject-related skills. Positive examples of differentiating content, presentation and methodology were observed in a mainstream lesson and in one subject-support lesson. Appropriate methodologies in use included active learning, the use of visual and tactile materials, and story-based learning. Two lessons effectively and creatively used ICT to promote student learning. An observed learning-support lesson specifically targeted literacy development with the aim of developing abilities in oral, reading and writing skills. A variety of content material and genre such as poems and stories was used successfully as medium to provide relevant contexts.

A commendable feature of all lessons was the constructive and frequent informal dialogue between students and teachers. Students were actively encouraged to express their opinions, identify their learning difficulties and explore solutions. Students were also encouraged to support each other through peer tutoring. All teachers provided sufficient explanation and repetition and learning was positively reinforced. There was a good working relationship between teachers and students. Teachers created a safe and comfortable learning environment. They were caring and patient, and consistently maintained an affirmative rapport with students which fostered respect. Students were co-operative and engaged in learning and were appreciative of the support and efforts made by their teachers. An analysis of homework copies, class-work folders and test scores provided good evidence of quality work being completed. Student achievement was seen to be in keeping with ability.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school's system for monitoring the progress of students who are in receipt of resource teaching and learning support is underdeveloped. While teachers currently submit records of work completed and comments on student progress to the SEN co-ordinator, these are insufficient to measure progress. In addition, there is no literacy assessment for incoming first-year students and the test currently used to assess general ability is dated, not normed on an Irish population and not fit for purpose. Appropriate tests should be selected with reference to the list of *Tests Approved for Use in Post-Primary Schools* that is published annually on the Department of Education and Skills website ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

Accurate information on all students' literacy skills and cognitive ability should inform class formation and teacher planning as well as provide baseline data to measure future student progress. It is therefore recommended that the school develops an assessment policy to ensure that enrolling students are appropriately assessed and that the achievements of students with special educational needs are re-assessed regularly so that their progress can be systematically monitored, recorded and reported. This should take place in the context of a whole-school review of all existing assessment practices.

Students' written work was found to be regularly corrected. Homework was set, collected and corrected in all classes. The latter activity was often used effectively as part of the review of prior learning and as an appropriate link with new learning.

In consultation with their NEPS psychologist, the school has established a systematic approach to applying for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations on behalf of eligible students and supporting them in school examinations.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school has a named co-ordinator and team of teachers who with the principal effectively organise and oversee the delivery of provision for students with special educational needs and actively support their colleagues.
- The school has established good routines to gather information on students at their point of transfer to the school.
- The school has a good range of provision in place including individual and small group withdrawal, team teaching and small group learning support classes.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning in the observed lessons was good to very good.
- A commendable feature of all lessons observed was the constructive and frequent informal dialogue between students and teachers. Students were actively encouraged to express their opinions, identify their learning difficulties and explore solutions.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the school begin a process of review that will lead to the development of a whole-school policy on inclusion.
- The school should review the current arrangement and the related duties and responsibilities associated with the co-ordinator of special educational needs.
- The National Educational Psychological Services psychologist and the visiting teachers should have direct access to relevant teaching staff and special needs assistants as well as to the students concerned.
- It is recommended that the special educational needs team develop a template for an individual student profile and learning programme to guide lesson planning and to monitor learning outcomes.
- The school should develop an assessment policy to ensure that enrolling students are appropriately assessed and that the achievements of students with special educational needs are re-assessed regularly so that their progress can be systematically monitored, recorded and reported.

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

*Published October 2011*