An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Desmond College
Newcastle West, County Limerick
Roll number: 71790J

Date of inspection: 22 September 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main findings of the evaluation:

- The quality of learning and teaching observed was uniformly of a high standard.
- The school recognises the interdependence between the ongoing promotion of inclusive practices and that of school improvement.
- A strong sense of teamwork supports a range of collaborative practices that attend to diverse needs through diverse methods.
- Allocated resources are utilised for the purposes intended.
- Supports are provided in a cohesive and systematic manner.
- Flexible approaches that focus on individual needs result in these resources being used in a range of effective ways including team-teaching.
- Sharing of information assists in personalising the learning for each student and in tracking their progress.
- A range of assessment practices is in place with good lines of communication maintained with primary schools and the relevant personnel from external agencies.

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

- The issues associated with complying with circular M29/95 require immediate attention.
- A review of the practice of maintaining a self-contained special class which follows a reduced curriculum is recommended.
- The practice of using retesting and other assessment tools to establish students’ progress in literacy and numeracy is recommended.
- In light of the successes to date, an examination of the various configurations and uses of in-class supports, such as team-teaching, is now recommended.
INTRODUCTION

Desmond College has an open enrolment policy which is reflected in the diversity among its 503 students. In welcoming and responding to such diversity, the school recognises that school improvement and the promotion of inclusive practices are closely intertwined. The school is under the auspices of Co. Limerick Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) and is involved in a number of initiatives including the School Support Programme. The evaluation for the provision for students with special educational needs was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited thirteen classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The positive findings in this report are considerable and the recommendations outlined are well within the remit of the school. The board of management of the school 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.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons visited was, in all cases, of a high standard. A total of ten teachers were visited over the course of the inspection. These lessons observed spanned a wide subject range across junior and senior cycle programmes including: Art, English, CSPE, Mathematics, History, Guidance, Information Technology, Engineering, and Geography. Classes were formed on the basis of whole-class groups, team-teaching, small-group and individual withdrawal. Teachers’ knowledge of their students was central to promoting purposeful learning environments that attended to students’ developmental and academic needs. Teachers were very well prepared for their lessons and promoted differentiated and personalised learning through a variety of suitably paced tasks. During the course of the inspection conversations with senior management and teachers revealed their professionalism and their desire to do what was best for their students. Clearly teacher self-reflection is the norm in Desmond College and this in part accounts for the high quality of the learning experiences afforded to students in the lessons observed.

Teachers framed and supported learning in a number of ways. Teacher questioning was used to good effect to introduce topics, to check for understanding and to maintain motivation and interest in the lessons. Questions of both lower order and higher order were well distributed in most lessons and the request for ‘hands up’ ensured an orderly environment which provided all with an opportunity to compose their response and to contribute to the lesson. Teachers’ responses to the answers given by students were always respectful of the effort made and on occasions teachers asked supplementary questions to promote further learning. This was particularly the case when higher order questions were only partially answered. The use of co-operative learning strategies, such as think-pair-share, may prove fruitful in enhancing the learning by increasing student accountability. Student self-advocacy was supported and encouraged by teachers and this in turn promoted students’ motivation to learn and persistence with learning. Students were comfortable asking questions of teachers and as noted by students in a team-teaching arrangement, such questions could be posed either publicly or privately. The practice of checking for understanding, by asking students to frame answers to self-composed questions, was also discussed with teachers.

Student learning was supported by a range of teacher-led activities which helped to differentiate the curriculum and to personalise learning. Such activities included highlighting keywords
associated with the content being learned, the use of mindmaps to frame learning and writing activities, along with strategies to support comprehension including students predicting questioning and availing of visual clues in advance of reading. In some lessons, pair-work and group-work were used to good effect to promote learning and provided the teacher with an opportunity to engage with students individually or in small groups. Occasionally student cooperation happened naturally and very successfully, without any formal teacher intervention. The co-operative nature of team-teaching as modelled by two teachers teaching in the same classroom also offers possibilities to promote similar co-operative activities among students. Further examination of the various configurations and benefits that team-teaching affords to students’ learning merit ongoing consideration.

The openness with which teachers engaged with their students significantly contributed to the creation of learning environments that were based on mutual respect and mutual trust. Humour, and praise were evident in lessons and students appeared to sense that the school was a place to which they and others belonged and where it was safe to be themselves. Students eagerness to assist with the routine practices such as, distributing classroom materials or reading allowed reflected well upon teachers’ efforts to foster relationships with students and promote a sense of community in each class. In all lessons there was an appropriate balance maintained between the amount of time spent on priority needs and the time spent accessing the wider curriculum. Role-play and the recording of such activities may prove useful in promoting social skills such as listening, comprehending, turn taking and empathising. These skills, by their nature, also promote higher order thinking. Continued exploration by all teachers of where the promotion of required social skills can align with content knowledge is encouraged.

At the conclusion of all lessons homework was assigned and flowed naturally from the content of the lesson. Most homework involved a combination of learning and writing and teachers were alert to the need to provide and respond to homework in a manner that took cognisance of students’ ability. Journals were seen to be used by students in all classes to document homework and were used to good effect in some resource classes to communicate with both home and the mainstream teacher. Some of the copies viewed had the homework signed and dated by the teachers, while in other cases it was clear that the work had been corrected by students under the direction of their teacher. A focus on the use of comments by teachers after submitting homework and the use of peer assessment before submission may assist in advancing the quality of learning that can be derived from homework. Plans to promote cross-age tutoring between Transition Year (TY) and first year students will also offer opportunities to promote peer-assisted learning. The school is also encouraged to continue to explore the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning. Displays of students’ work, either on classroom walls or through the school website and software, would not only foster a sense of belonging but would also provide authentic audiences which may serve to motivate students.

A notable feature of Desmond College is the awareness among the mainstream teachers of their key role in ensuring the quality of the learning experience enjoyed by students with special educational needs. Such an awareness, which requires whole-school and ongoing support, is reflected in a variety of teacher actions including the documentation of specific needs and the implications for learning that such needs represent in the different subject areas. Teachers who supported small groups and individuals communicated effectively with mainstream subject teachers and were able to support access to the curriculum through the pre-teaching and post-teaching of relevant content knowledge. The high standard of teaching and learning observed is due in part to the manner in which the school purposely attends to the quality of provision and whole school support.
Teamwork is a central feature of the efforts made by senior management and teachers in Desmond College to promote effective inclusive practices. The leadership shown by principal and deputy principal is pivotal to sustaining whole school support among all staff and is manifested in a number of ways.

At the time of the evaluation the school was effectively and appropriately deploying the 197 hours of additional teacher allocation provided for special educational needs. This allocation includes twenty-two hours for a special class which is designated for mild general learning disabilities. Among the other needs identified are students with low achievement who are eligible for learning support, usually in the areas of literacy and numeracy, as well as students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities. This allocation aligns with other supports and initiatives provided by the Department, VEC and others. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, and a suitable balance is struck between providing for individual prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum. Support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner and includes individual student withdrawal, small group withdrawal and, of late, team-teaching. The school is mindful of the possibility of students, including students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs, presenting with a range of special educational needs, including being exceptionally able. The school is also aware that it is not fully in compliance with circular M29/95 and has begun to address the need to provide a minimum of twenty-eight hours of instruction per week.

There are eight members of staff with recognised qualifications in special education. These teachers work closely with one another and many are timetabled to meet on a weekly basis. Ongoing communication, collaboration and self-evaluation are also achieved by the daily informal interaction that occurs between teachers in the school. Through their engagement, as members of the school’s various subject departments, the eight qualified teachers work in tandem with their colleagues, and may on occasions present to staff. The appointed co-ordinator holds a special duties post and fulfils the role effectively, conscientiously and thoroughly. In keeping with Department guidelines the school recognises that the quality of the educational experience hinges on the actions of the mainstream teacher. As well as support from those qualified in the area, the mainstream teachers are encouraged to attend to their own professional development and this combined with an impressive series of whole-staff presentations and workshops is clearly transferring positively into mainstream classrooms. The promotion of effective inclusive practices is further supported by the good work of the six appointed special needs assistants. Their contribution was frequently acknowledged by students and teachers alike during the course of the inspection. Of note was their ability to recognise, promote and celebrate students’ increased independence as they advanced through the school.

Classes are generally formed on the basis of mixed ability in first year, with some of the allocation provided for a designated special class used to create a smaller class group in each of the three junior cycle years. This class operates on a reduced curriculum and does not study Science, Gaeilge or a modern language. The remaining second and third year classes continue to be of mixed ability except for Gaeilge, English and Mathematics. Concurrent timetabling in each of these subjects facilitates students in accessing their maximum level of achievement. In senior cycle supports continue to be provided. Notwithstanding the very good intentions and success of the smaller self-contained class format in the three junior cycle years, concerns were discussed at
the formal feedback meeting. These concerns centred on the criteria for establishing this class, the diversity of abilities and needs represented in the class and how these may be met in more mainstream settings. Consideration should be given to reconfiguring the class to more of a resource room and less as a self-contained class group. Given the quality of individualised attention to students, by teachers in the other classes observed it is recommended that the school examine the possibility of students in this class being afforded a broader educational experience. Such an experience may be facilitated, in part, by availing of the more recently introduced practice of team teaching to bridge the movement outwards from the smaller class to the mixed ability setting enjoyed by other students. Similar use of in-class supports such as team-teaching may also prove effective for students displaying a range of needs including challenging behaviour and exceptional ability.

The school is well resourced with appropriate learning materials though further investment in ICT in more classrooms, would support the achievement of a number of goals including those associated with literacy and numeracy, and in particular digital literacy. Classrooms are well maintained and many have displays of students’ own work which assists with promoting their sense of achievement and belonging. There are good material resources available in the school including designated office and support rooms. As discussed with teachers, the well-constructed school website and other similar platforms may also offer opportunities for students to present their work in a manner that is authentic and in a way that may motivate students to give of their best. Students are further facilitated by a range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities which are open to all and appreciated by students. Such activities also contribute to the development of students’ relationship with their teachers and with each other. They also nurture students’ self-esteem, well being and sense of belonging which along with the acquisition of a range of knowledge and skills, will serve students well during and after their time in Desmond College.

The overall quality of provision and whole school support in attending to the needs of all its students is very good and the quality of planning and preparation is a key determining factor in maintaining such quality.

**Planning and Preparation**

All available additional teaching hours are factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction and this supports the school’s efforts to provide a cohesive and structured approach to meeting identified needs. As well as enabling teachers to work consistently with students, this practice also facilitates the deployment of staff in a purposeful and focused manner with teachers’ qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests aligning with students’ identified strengths, interests and special educational needs. Subject planning mirrors the high quality of individual teachers’ lesson plans and the seven-week cycle of planning being adopted at a whole school level is a model of good practice.

The school adopts a systematic and timely approach to planning and preparing for all students who enrol in the school. Good teamwork ensures that considerable preparatory work is done well in advance of students’ first day in school. Standardised and diagnostic testing is used appropriately and engagement with parents, students and teachers is ongoing throughout the school year. Very good lines of communication exist also with relevant external agencies. Dissemination of information and effective record keeping fosters a whole-school approach and this is one of the school’s considerable strengths.
In light of the numbers who present upon enrolment, with difficulties associated with literacy skills, and to a lesser extent, numeracy skills, it is recommended that retesting of all students be undertaken to determine progress in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Such retesting will need to be set in the context of other less easily measured attainments and the practice of using student case studies would assist in capturing the less tangible but equally important aspects of students’ learning and development. These assessment tools in turn can be used to track specific initiatives associated with the Department-funded School Support Programme including the school’s prudent extension of the Junior Certificate School Programme. Surveying students by way of questionnaires, as seen in the OECD publication *Student Engagement at School* (2003) may assist further in this regard. The data gathered can also be used to promote and support the school’s ongoing engagement with individualised education plans.

The school’s policy document on special needs is well constructed and during the course of the inspection it was clear that the contents of the policy are given expression on a daily basis. The key role of the classroom subject teacher is recognised in the policy while the roles and responsibilities of other staff members are clearly stated. The voice of students and parents is also well referenced. The role of the special needs assistants is correctly stated and it may be of use to place this in the commendable staff handbook. Similarly, an expansion of the list of teaching methodologies found in the special needs policy could inform the staff handbook. Such a focus on teaching and learning could also draw on the findings of this report where, for example, teacher questioning practices and responses to students’ answers could be shared. Clear agreed understandings on such concepts as ‘inclusion’, ‘whole school approach’, ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’ could also be similarly shared among staff and would inform further subject planning which already makes considerable reference to planning for students with identified needs. This planning ultimately recognises that attending to certain students’ needs assist in improving the quality of learning for all students. An overall inclusion policy may also prove beneficial to the school context, where existing and desired practices can be captured and shared. As a consequence such an inclusion policy could also be used by the school to self-evaluate other actions, so as to determine how they in turn promote the principles and practices of inclusion.

Agreed procedures on how best to track interventions and monitor student progress, through the use of ICT facilities, merit consideration. Many of the aspects associated with a student register, detailing individual students’ needs, additional hours allocated, the teachers and non-teaching staff involved, the models of delivery and the programme of work being undertaken are already in place. With some additional information this register would serve to inform and guide all staff in their engagements with individual students. Additional information could include an outline of students’ learning styles and strengths, the progress made, when further progress will be reviewed, and by whom. Furthermore, such a register would assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models upon the overall additional hours allocated and their impact upon achieving optimum outcomes for students. Similarly, the register could inform and be informed by individualised education plans.

The inclusive culture of the school is also reflected in the planning associated with mentoring and induction programmes initiated for new staff members, the peer systems in place among students and the intergenerational activities organised between students and the more elderly members of the community. All concerned are deserving of much praise. The School Completion Programme is considering extending its role through providing in-class supports and again such practice augurs well in promoting an effective inclusive and purposeful learning environment in school, which can be further supported by activities outside of school.
In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). In general students are facilitated in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodations provided and are assisted in accessing these when they sit their pre-examinations. The participation and achievements of students with special educational needs in Certificate examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned.

**CONCLUSION**

A summary of the draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation was presented to the principal, deputy principal and teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. These were discussed with the inspector.

*Published, February 2011*
Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The school is delighted that the report acknowledges the excellent work of the entire school community in the area of Special Education Needs. In particular, we welcome the affirmation of our quality teaching and learning as well as our inclusivity and teamwork.

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

Compliance with Circular M29/95 is a priority for the next academic year. It is planned to integrate special classes with mainstream classes from next year. It is intended that the school continues to incorporate team-teaching into the timetable.