Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Coláiste Éamonn Rís,
Thomas Street, Wexford
Roll number: 63640R

Date of inspection: 08 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING
IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following an evaluation of the provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) in Coláiste Éamonn Rís. 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 and members of the SEN team. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Éamonn Rís is a voluntary catholic secondary school for boys under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST). At the time of the evaluation there was a total enrolment of 556 students. The college promotes and upholds an inclusive ethos through its whole-school organisation and planning documentation as well as in its actions, particularly in reference to the enrolment of students with disabilities or other special educational needs (SEN). The college has an allocation of 97.5 resource teaching hours to support students diagnosed with a range of low and high incidence needs such as autism spectrum disorders, physical disabilities, emotional disturbance and behavioural problems, and general and specific learning difficulties. In addition, the college has been allocated 15.5 teaching hours to provide learning support for students with specific difficulties in literacy and numeracy. Allocated hours are used efficiently and effectively to provide a range of supports such as individual and small group withdrawal, small classes and in class support. The college’s register of students, which details their allocated hours and provision, is a valuable means of monitoring the productive use of limited resources. The college’s policy document on gifted children demonstrates its concern for, and commitment to supporting able and talented students as well.

The college has hosted a unit for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) since 2007. A well-qualified teacher acts as the co-ordinator. She is responsible for the facility’s organisation and planning and chairs a weekly meeting for the unit staff which includes a second teacher with SEN qualifications and two special needs assistants. Appropriate procedures for managing incidents and challenging behaviour are in place. The facility, consisting of a large teaching area with a sub-division for individual work stations, rooms for tuition and administration work, a sensory room and a toilet, is housed in a recent addition to the main school building. While some individual and small group teaching and independent work take place in the unit, the students are mainstreamed as much as possible. The unit is supervised before and after school hours and during school breaks and is used for respite purposes at these times.
Students with diagnosed special educational needs and those requiring learning support are identified at entry through information gathered from the feeder primary schools and the students’ parents, and through the results of school-based testing. A successful programme to ensure a smooth transition from primary to secondary, and from secondary to post-school education or training, for students with special educational needs is overseen by the co-ordinators of SEN and the ASD unit with the support of the guidance counsellor. For the junior cycle programme, all students are assigned to mixed ability classes with setting taking place in second year for Mathematics and Irish. In senior cycle classes are set by student choice of programme, subjects and levels. There is concurrent timetabling in English, Irish and Mathematics to facilitate movement. Overall, there is good access to a broad and balanced curriculum for all students.

The majority of the support teaching hours outside of the ASD unit allocation are assigned to a number of part-time teachers. These teachers, apart from one who at the time of the evaluation was due to complete a post-graduate diploma course in special education, do not have any special education qualifications. The timetabling of subject specialists to provide subject support for certain students in class or on a withdrawal basis is good practice. However, the college should ensure that those students who, according to their education plans, require specialist intervention to develop skills in exceptional areas such as literacy or social skills, have access to teaching staff with relevant SEN qualifications. This is an issue of intelligent scheduling and should be addressed in advance of the construction of the timetable. A suitably qualified teacher with a post of responsibility has been named as the SEN co-ordinator. Her significant duties have been agreed with management and consist of a range of appropriate tasks. At the time of the evaluation, the co-ordinator was not scheduled to teach in any resource/learning classes. In consideration of her qualifications, experience, organisational responsibilities and personal interests, it is strongly suggested that a significant proportion of her future timetable be allocated to support teaching. This would help student access to qualified personnel.

The college has developed a policy on special educational needs which references the legal context and provides some information on school procedures regarding transfer, placement, and assessment and reporting. It also lists nine creditable aims, but does not detail how these aims will be monitored or achieved. This document is now at least seven years old and a review is overdue. In addition, there is no policy document outlining the organisation, procedures and practices related to the ASD unit and the students assigned to it. It is recommended therefore that the college set up a working group to draft a whole-school policy on inclusion that would highlight the college’s aspirations to be fully inclusive, list the aims and actions required to achieve this, and document the inclusive procedures and practices already in place as well as those requiring development. All staff and the board of management should be consulted during this process. The Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines (DES, 2007) can be a useful resource for this exercise.

The continuing professional development of the teaching staff is encouraged and supported by the board of management. Recently, teachers have benefited from training in Assessment for Learning, Co-operative Learning, and managing challenging behaviour. In response to the latter topic, the college is commended for piloting a Positive Behaviour Programme with selected students participating in the use of Individual Behaviour Plans and the creation of a positive affirmation committee which actively identifies and rewards students. The identification of further opportunities for training should be guided by an audit of the needs of staff. Topics to consider for future engagement include input on Asperger’s Syndrome in the mainstream, inclusive teaching strategies and co-operative teaching. Affiliation fees to relevant professional associations are also funded by the board. The co-ordinators and management have benefited
from regular liaison and support of external professionals including their Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) and their National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) psychologist as well as occupational and speech-language therapists and the visiting teacher for the visually impaired.

The school has been allocated five full-time special needs assistants (SNAs). They are all suitably qualified and are assigned either to support the students from the ASD unit or individual students with specific diagnosed needs. They meet weekly with the co-ordinators and also attend staff meetings. The SNAs have been instrumental in developing a recent policy document to guide their work in the college. Rightly, there is an emphasis on care and support for the students and the SNAs are fully aware of the importance of confidentiality and the development of student independence. They work under the direction of the teachers and hold a very positive view of the college.

**Planning and Preparation**

The overall quality of planning for students with special educational needs is good. Members of the SEN team and members of the ASD team attend separate but regular planning meetings where minutes are kept. All students with a recognised low or high incidence special educational need are subject to the college’s individual education planning process. The SEN co-ordinator leads the process using a school-developed template. Teachers, parents and students are encouraged to participate in the process to assist the identification of agreed targets and the sharing of support strategies. The SEN co-ordinator has accurately identified individual planning as an area for review and development. This should include a revision of the planning template to ensure ease of access and use for mainstream teachers, the increased involvement of mainstream teachers in identifying targets and supporting their achievement, and the further development of the current system to enable better monitoring. It is recommended that this review of the individual planning process be facilitated and supported by management.

The ASD co-ordinator leads the development of individual education plans (IEPs) for students assigned to the ASD unit. She meets with parents and students twice yearly to develop and review the plans. These IEPs identify specific learning, communication and behavioural targets which guide the instruction in the unit. At the time of the evaluation, the IEP targets were not being shared with mainstream teachers. It is recommended that one or two targets for each student be shared with mainstream teachers. Awareness of targeted goals, especially those dealing with communication skills and behaviour that can effect classroom participation, can usefully elicit the support of all teachers in the achievement of these targets and promote a consistent approach across the school.

Teachers assigned to resource or learning support work use the IEP and input from the individual students and their teachers as a guide to lesson planning. A Group Profile Form is completed by each support teacher to identify group needs, aims and objectives to guide short and long term lesson planning. Mainstream subject teachers are supported in their efforts to provide inclusive classrooms through the provision of accurate information about individual student needs and abilities. Teachers have the opportunity to contribute to the student’s individual education plans and have ready access to them. Teachers also have access to the SEN and ASD co-ordinators for advice as well as access to a range of reference and resource teaching materials to support their planning. Teachers may refer students of concern directly to the SEN co-ordinator for investigation.
There is great variation in how subject departments support inclusion through their subject plans. The creation and maintenance of inclusive classrooms through the provision of appropriate methodologies, strategies and materials is a central focus of subject planning for some subject departments. However, for others this area is seriously neglected. It is recommended that every subject department review its planning for inclusion at the earliest opportunity. Subject planning should reference resources such as the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities (NCCA, 2007) and the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines (DES, 2007). It would be useful if the SEN co-ordinator could be given an advisory role in this work.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Nine lessons were observed during the two days of the inspection. These lessons reflected the range of provision provided in the college and included in-class support, support from special needs assistants, small learning-support groups and banded subject classes and included students with both low and high incidence special educational needs. The lessons covered a range of a range of subject areas such as English, Mathematics and Science at both junior and senior cycle.

The overall quality of teaching and learning was judged to be good. The better lessons were marked by good introductions with clearly stated objectives, frequent and relevant explanations, structured opportunities for repetition and reinforcement, and closing summaries of the achieved objectives. In most lessons, students were motivated and engaged in the learning process. They actively participated and were encouraged to think creatively and to question. Good examples of co-operative learning were observed. In a science lesson, students collaborated successfully in pairs to complete set tasks which fostered a climate of social and academic interaction and achievement. In a mathematics lesson, paired students checked each other’s learning and sought help from their partner before appealing to the teacher. In both lessons, a combination of peer-tutoring reinforced learning and developed mutually supportive partnerships. Other methodologies successfully employed included active learning where students dynamically engaged in the learning process.

A ‘lead and support’ form of co-operative teaching was observed in two separate lessons. In each, a subject specialist planned the lesson content and led the instruction while a support teacher working under their direction provided additional individualised support to targeted students or small groups. This model of co-teaching was seen to be quite effective in that it kept targeted students with special educational needs on task and ensured they were active participants in the lesson. The college should be encouraged by this success and open to further experimentation with other forms of co-operative teaching. In senior classes, where subject banding occurred, an appropriate range of teaching strategies was observed. Teachers accommodated for individual students’ needs and abilities by differentiating the content, the set tasks and the student outcomes.

The quality of teaching and learning in the support classes was good in most instances. In lessons showing best practice, instruction was based on specific individual student needs. These lessons were well planned and correlated with targets in the student’s individual education plan. Both commercial programmes and teacher-designed activities were used effectively. Students often worked independent of their peers, but received consistent individual guidance.

A number of students, with and without special educational needs, have difficulties in the area of literacy. Some students attend resource or learning support classes for direct instruction in literacy skill development. Observed lessons featured successful and well-structured interventions
focusing on the development of specific reading or writing skills. However, the college has not as yet documented a whole-school strategy to guide the continuing development of literacy skills for all students. It is recommended therefore that the college build on existing practice by developing and documenting such a strategy to ensure that every student with specific literacy needs is identified, targeted for intervention, and monitored regularly, and that all students engage in a developmental approach to reading that spans all curriculum areas across the school.

ASSESSMENT

A good range of appropriate tests is in use as part of the entrance testing and for diagnostic testing. Students are assessed on entry using standardised tests of literacy attainment and reasoning ability. The results help in the understanding of each student’s potential and contribute to forming the mixed-ability classes in first year. All students identified at entry as having potential learning difficulties, and those referred later by class teachers, are investigated by the SEN co-ordinator. Psychological and other professional reports are stored securely by the SEN and the ASD co-ordinators. Assessment information is extracted and integrated into the individual education plans. Pertinent information is disseminated to teaching staff for lesson planning purposes.

The SEN co-ordinator has identified aspects of the college’s assessment practice for review and development. For this reason, it is recommended that management facilitate and support a review of all current practices with the aim of developing a whole-school policy on assessment. In particular the college should document how the progress of individual students with special educational needs is measured and monitored throughout their time in school. The role of other staff, including the possibility of English teachers administering standardised tests of reading and spelling periodically to their own classes, should be examined.

Classroom assessment is based on course objectives and consists of teacher observation, questioning, set work, class tests and end of term tests. A comprehensive whole-school policy on homework has been drafted to provide guidance in ensuring homework assists students in their learning. Students were seen recording set homework in their journals and teachers collected and corrected the previous day’s homework in the classes visited. Teachers carefully record marks attained in homework, class work and tests, and use them to monitor progress. Student achievement is seen to be in keeping with assessed levels of ability. The college commendably supports students in their applications for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations by assessing needs, providing training in the use of accommodations, and providing the accommodations during end of term and end of year tests.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The college promotes and upholds an inclusive ethos through its whole-school organisation and planning documentation as well as in its actions, particularly in reference to enrolment.
- Allocated teaching hours are used efficiently and effectively to provide a range of supports.
- A successful programme to ensure a smooth transition from primary to secondary, and from secondary to post-school education or training, for students with special educational needs is overseen by the co-ordinators of SEN and the ASD unit with the support of the guidance counsellor.
- Overall, there is good access to a broad and balanced curriculum for all students.
- Two suitably qualified teachers successfully co-ordinate the work of the SEN department and the ASD unit.
- The continuing professional development of the teaching staff is encouraged and supported by the board of management.
- The overall quality of planning for students with special educational needs is good with the effective use of individual education plans and group profiles.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning is good and good examples of co-operative learning and co-operative teaching were observed.
- A good range of appropriate tests is in use as part of the entrance testing and for diagnostic testing.

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

- The college should draft a whole-school policy on inclusion to highlight the college’s aspirations to be fully inclusive, to list the aims and actions required to achieve this, and to document the many inclusive procedures and practices already in place as well as those requiring development.
- A review of the individual education planning process should be facilitated and supported by management.
- Every subject department should review its planning for inclusion with the advice and support of the SEN co-ordinator.
- It is recommended that the college develop and document a strategy to ensure that every student with specific literacy needs is identified, targeted for intervention and monitored annually, and that all students engage in a developmental approach to reading that spans all curriculum areas across the school.
- Management should facilitate and support a review of all current practices with the aim of developing a whole-school policy on assessment.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and 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

The Board of Management welcomes the report and the recognition therein of the school’s efforts to further the inclusive ethos of the school in keeping with the Edmund Rice Charter. The Board felt the commitment of the staff and the Board to professional development was noted in the report. Some of the areas highlighted for review had already been prioritised for attention by the staff working in special needs. The Board was pleased that the inspector recognised and affirmed the quality of planning and preparation and teaching and learning taking place in the school.

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

The Board of Management commits to carrying out a review of the school’s policy on special educational needs taking into account the recommendations set out in the subject inspection report. The Board will build on the existing strengths highlighted in the report and endeavour to implement the recommendations incrementally in the context of available resources. The timetabling issue raised will be addressed during the preparation of the 2011-12 timetable. Work on developing a literacy policy has already commenced.