

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**Saint Declan's Community College
Kilmacthomas, County Waterford
Roll number: 72230W**

Date of inspection: 07 May 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 of special educational needs (SEN) in St Declan's Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the provision and of teaching and learning for students with special educational needs and makes recommendations for the further development of 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. 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 support team. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Declan's Community College was founded in 1999 to serve the population of Kilmacthomas and surrounding areas. The college has an open enrolment policy and provides education for boys and girls in a supportive and caring environment. St Declan's offers both the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) for junior cycle students. At senior cycle, students have the option of participating in a Transition Year (TY) programme or they can proceed directly to either the established Leaving Certificate (LC) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. There is open access to all programmes and a broad and balanced curriculum for all students. At the time of the evaluation, 684 students were enrolled in St Declan's Community College. The college's mission statement asserts that St Declan's aspires to enable students to reach their full potential by encouraging the individuality of talents and gifts unique to each. This aspiration is realised in the college's range of inclusive policies and practices which support a whole-school approach. In 2007 the college opened a unit for students with autism. This positive response to the needs of the community is commendable.

There is a very good system to support the transfer of students with special educational needs which includes direct contact with parents, students and the feeder schools to share information and to ensure appropriate preparations are made. Students who enrol from up to seventeen local primary schools sit an assessment test prior to entry. Additional testing is scheduled for selected individuals to aid planning. Relevant information on students is disseminated to mainstream staff and resource teachers on a need-to-know basis.

The management and staff of St Declan's evince a positive and pro-active attitude towards inclusion. The principal who was appointed just two years ago has focussed on school development planning as a priority. As part of this he has introduced mixed ability grouping in junior cycle classes, facilitated the development of draft policies in the area of special educational needs, targeted the development of information and communication technology (ICT) resources and begun to build teacher capacity for inclusive instruction. These measures proactively support

inclusive schooling. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has allocated 53.5 teaching support hours to the college – twenty and a half teaching hours for seven students in low incidence categories such as physical, sensory and emotional-behavioural difficulties and thirty-three teaching hours for twenty-two students in the high incidence categories of general and specific learning difficulties. The college also has an allocation of twenty-two hours for learning support and fourteen discretionary support hours provided by the Department. All of the allocated hours are used appropriately to support students.

The provision for students with special educational needs in St Declan's is student-centred in that it is based on individual needs and remains flexible. There is a range of appropriate support in both the junior and senior cycles. The principal mode is withdrawal on a small group or individual basis. Students are withdrawn mainly from Irish or French classes when students have language exemptions or from religious education classes. Students, including some with special educational needs, who follow the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), are spread throughout the year group. This is good practice. Support for students in the JCSP includes peer tutoring and participation in a range of literacy and numeracy initiatives provided by both mainstream and resource staff. Students in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme are supported through smaller classes and team teaching. Literacy support is also available throughout the senior cycle.

The special educational needs team works collaboratively with the management to promote whole-school inclusive practices. The team is co-ordinated by a post-holder who is a well qualified and experienced teacher. The co-ordinator and two other teachers also qualified in special educational needs collaborate as a team to organise, plan the provision and lead a core group of resource teachers. The team members are dedicated and positive in their work. They are timetabled for weekly planning meetings. The special educational needs team is accessible for advice and support to mainstream and resource teachers and plays a role in inducting new staff.

The draft special educational needs policy document prepared by the team commendably notes that a whole-school approach to differentiated learning and basic skills will be a future focus for the college. The team has also targeted additional areas for future development including the advancement of the individual planning process and an audit and review of resources. The management is encouraged to support the team in these worthwhile endeavours. The special educational needs policy folder contains information on a range of topics including the assessment of incoming students, the support provided for mainstream staff, planning procedures, the resources available and reasonable accommodations. This provides useful guidance for the resource teachers and its development should continue.

The principal is spearheading efforts to build on current inclusive practices and to increase the overall capacity of the teaching staff to progress inclusion in the classroom. An audit of staff members' specific needs in this regard would be useful. The teachers in the college have already participated in a range of continuing professional development courses with relevance to providing inclusive instruction. These include in-service on differentiation, mixed ability and autism. Staff members including the principal attend local cluster meetings organised by the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) regional office and the school is participating in a NEPS pilot study concerning assessment and the transfer of students from primary and post-primary schools.

The college's autism unit has a staffing allocation of thirty-three teaching hours and these are shared between two teachers who each hold a qualification in the area of autism. One of these teachers acts as the unit co-ordinator. There were two students placed in the unit at the time of the

evaluation but this number is likely to increase in the future. One prospective student attends the unit one day each week to help prepare him for the transfer in September. The management continues to provide support for the autism unit and encourages efforts to integrate the students from the unit with their peers whenever feasible. Some good work has been done in this regard. Reverse integration is practiced to maximise the students' contact with their peers and one of the students participates in the college athletic team as an extra-curricular activity. The suite of purpose-built rooms which houses the autism unit have been designed with the needs of students with autism in mind. The unit resources include two individual workstations, two teachers' desks, a kitchen area fitted with appliances, two toilets, a relaxation area, a relaxation game room with observation window, and a store room. There is a well-advanced draft policy for the autism unit.

The school has sufficient allocation to employ five full-time special needs assistants (SNAs). One SNA is assigned to the autism unit to provide support to the students within the unit and to accompany them when they are included in mainstream classes or activities. The other four SNAs are assigned to support specific students in the mainstream. The SNAs were very positive about their work and clear regarding their role of promoting the independence of the students. The SNAs are required to fill in daily diaries of their work. This provides a useful record to enable the monitoring of individual students and the efforts to include them. There is no written college policy to guide the work of the SNAs. The school should now draft such a policy to further develop the work of the SNAs and provide clear guidance for all parties regarding the role and function of SNAs in the college.

According to the principal, no provision to identify or support students who are gifted or talented is made at present. However, he acknowledged that both he and the staff recognise that these students have special needs and that this is an area for development. The school is advised to investigate how this might be done and to consider the drafting of a school policy in accordance with the advice available in the *Gifted and Talented Pupils Guidelines for Teachers* published by the National Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (2007).

Two rooms have been designated as support rooms. Student records are kept securely locked in one of these rooms but are accessible to all teaching staff. Relevant teaching materials are stored here in and in the JCSP resource room. An audit of resources is held annually. The college has begun to develop its ICT resources and there are a good number of data projectors and laptops available. Five computers and a printer were ordered recently for use in the special educational needs area. ICT has the potential of enhancing the work of the special educational needs team and the resource teachers.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The college has created a form to record the details of personal learning styles, likes and dislikes, information on curriculum, subjects and teachers, attendance, and literacy and numeracy skills for junior cycle students. This record and the student profiles prepared and distributed to tutors and subject teachers by the special educational needs team provide significant information to aid subject lesson planning for inclusive instruction. The team also offers advice on classroom planning to mainstream teachers and has made plans to distribute relevant sections of the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007) for subject staff. In addition, the whole-school development plan encourages each subject department to focus on learning outcomes, methodology, assessment and resources for each year group.

The resource teachers are commended for making an initial and creditable engagement with the individual education plan (IEP) process. A school template is used to record individual strengths

and needs, long term goals and short term objectives as well as details of the methods and materials and the evaluation process used. On a final page of the template resource teachers record short term learning targets as well as information on the roles to be played by the resource teacher, the relevant subject teacher and the home. Resource teachers also keep class folders with plans for work to be covered and work completed. Two areas for the future development of the IEP process have been identified by the special educational needs support team. One is the formalising of procedures to engage parents and the students more proactively in the IEP process. Both parents and the students should play a pivotal role in the recognition of student strengths and meaningful goals and in implementing and reviewing the plan. A second area the team has identified is the identification and writing of specific learning objectives. A third area that the team should consider for development is the inclusion of social and behavioural targets where appropriate in each student's IEP. Such targets would help mainstream teachers to reinforce targeted behaviours. It is recommended therefore that the team take the needed steps to further develop the IEP process. This should be done with the support of the college management and, as required, the advice and support from agencies such as the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie).

Together the two teachers in the autism unit have created an autism-friendly learning environment for their students. The unit is organised with a TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children) approach with visual schedules and checklists, consistent work routines and clear boundaries for areas designated for special activities. There is a good system of planning and record-keeping in practice in the autism unit. General curriculum planning is completed for each student for each term. The development of social, communication and life skills is central to curricular planning and rightly there is a specific focus on spontaneous functional communication as a language goal. Baseline information on a range of lifeskills is used effectively to sequence skill building activities and to record acquired skills. The unit teachers have created student profiles to record previous educational experiences and assessment data, information on student skills in areas such as self-management, language and communication, literacy, numeracy ICT, fine and gross motor, and identified learning needs. The unit teachers schedule twice yearly meetings with parents to discuss the curriculum and to review individual education plans. This is good practice. The students have access to a range of curricular areas including aspects of Mathematics, Science, Home Economics, Art and Physical Education. It is recommended that the teachers in the unit familiarise themselves with the strands and strand units of the Primary School Curriculum and the advice and support for planning teaching and learning contained in the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (both available at www.ncca.ie) as these are valuable resources to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum for these students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eight lessons involving nine teachers were observed during this evaluation. The lessons featured three individual and small group withdrawal classes providing support in Mathematics, two withdrawal classes providing support in English and literacy skills, one Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) English and Communications class featuring team teaching, and two lessons in the autism unit - one Mathematics and one Home Economics. The five withdrawal classes paralleled and reinforced work that was being done in the mainstream English and mathematics classes. In many cases students had the same teacher for their mainstream class and their resource class and, where this was not the case, the resource teacher maintained regular contact with the class teacher to monitor the student's learning needs. This is good practice. Overall, the quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to excellent. In all lessons students were actively engaged in learning and were both co-operative and responsive. The questioning of students and

an examination of their folders of work and copies showed good progress and a positive work rate. The teachers were well prepared and lessons were started with a review or reference to previous learning. The good practice of sharing intended learning outcomes with the students was seen in only two lessons. This practice should feature in all lessons but especially with students with special educational needs who are likely to benefit from it..

All teachers were positive and caring in their efforts to provide support. Lessons featured individualised direct instruction but this was done in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. There was a constant use of praise and encouragement. The development and reinforcement of appropriate subject vocabulary was highlighted appropriately. The pace of lessons was good as was the use of repetition and reinforcement activities to consolidate learning. Independent work was monitored closely. Homework was set and corrected with each student. Teaching tended to focus on the subject textbook and examples provided on worksheets, in copies or on the board. Resource teachers should investigate the wide range of teaching materials and resources available including software that might make learning more interesting and more accessible to students with special educational needs. Co-operative learning strategies can maximize each student's learning and decrease teacher dependence and so should be considered for use in these small group withdrawal lessons as well as in the larger mainstream classes. Team teaching is being piloted by the school in a number of LCA classes with a resource teacher being assigned to work alongside a subject specialist. Team teaching encourages collaborative planning and the sharing of good practice that can be instrumental in building the college's capacity for inclusive instruction. This good practice should be extended to other class groups. It is recommended therefore that the college management facilitates the implementation of a wider range of teaching strategies and methodologies in both resource and mainstream classes that will build on existing good practice and serve to advance inclusive classroom practices that can benefit all learners.

Group instruction is the dominant mode in use in the autism unit. This is supported with a high level of individualised support within the group context and the use of individual instruction for the development of new skills. An appropriate range of methodologies and strategies are in use including social stories, role play, modelling, peer learning and direct instruction. The teachers are supported by occupational and speech-language therapists from the Health Service Executive who provide individualised programmes of work for the students.

ASSESSMENT

Prospective students of St Declan's attend for an assessment of verbal and numerical reasoning tests and reading skills before entry. Additional tests, including diagnostic tests, are administered with parental permission when it is felt additional information on students would help the college to better plan interventions and support.

The modes of assessment of learning in use in St Declan's includes homework, class work, class tests, class participation, oral work, term examinations and trial examinations as well as the use of statements and learning outcomes to monitor progress in the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Students are informed of their progress through oral feedback, comments and marks on class and homework, and the revision of class tests and term exams. Parents are informed through the student journal, Christmas and summer reports, scheduled parent-teacher meetings, and individually scheduled progress meetings. In addition, the resource teachers keep samples of work, and records of work completed and learning targets met. The teachers in the autism unit use checklists, recorded observations and folders of work completed to monitor the progress of their students. They maintain good contact with the student's parents with the use of daily journals, telephone calls and scheduled meetings to report

and discuss progress. The communication between the resource teachers and the parents of the students they work with tends to be informal and at the request of either the teachers or the parents.

The members of the special educational needs team have recognised the need to develop re-testing and attainment monitoring procedures in the college. In light of this it would be timely for the school to conduct a whole-school review of the purpose and value of all existing assessment practices including how information about the processes and outcomes of learning are gathered, interpreted and used as well as reported to students, parents and teachers. The special educational needs policy draft document mentions assessment for learning (AfL). The role and functions of both AfL and assessment of learning should be considered as part of this exercise which should lead eventually to the development of a whole-school policy on assessment. Chapter Two of the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) has some advice regarding this process.

St Declan's supports students in their applications for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations and proactively provides training for students in the use of needed accommodations and endeavours to facilitate their use in school examinations. The special educational needs co-ordinator works with the LCA co-ordinator and the Guidance Counsellor to support students in their application for post-school placements and their requests for accommodations at third level.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The college has an open enrolment policy and provides a broad and balanced curriculum for all students.
- The provision for students with special educational needs in St Declan's is student-centred in that it is based on individual needs and remains flexible.
- All of the hours allocated to support students with special educational needs are used appropriately.
- The special educational needs team works collaboratively with the management to organise the provision and to promote whole-school inclusive practices.
- The resource teachers are commended for making an initial and creditable engagement with the individual education plan (IEP) process.
- The college hosts a unit which successfully provides an autism-friendly learning environment for students with autistic spectrum disorders.
- Overall, the quality of teaching and learning in the observed lessons ranged from good to excellent.
- All teachers were positive and caring in their efforts to provide support

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 special educational needs team further develop the IEP process.
- The teachers in the autism unit should familiarise themselves with the strands and strand units of the Primary School Curriculum and the advice and support for planning teaching and learning contained in the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* as these are valuable resources to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum for students with autistic spectrum disorders.

- The school should draft a policy to further develop the work of the SNAs and to provide clear guidance for all parties regarding the role and function of SNAs in the college.
- It is recommended that the college management facilitates the implementation of a wider range of teaching strategies and methodologies including co-operative learning and co-operative teaching in both resource and mainstream classes.
- It would be timely for the school to conduct a whole-school review of the purpose and value of all existing assessment practices including how information about the processes and outcomes of learning are gathered, interpreted and used as well as reported to students, parents and teachers.

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

Published April 2011