Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

St. Munchin’s College, Corbally
Limerick
Roll number: 64240G

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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection St. Munchin’s College, Limerick. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs (SEN) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of students with special educational needs in the college. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed college planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE COLLEGE SUPPORT

The resources provided for students identified with special educational needs in St. Munchin’s College are used in a variety of ways. The school is in receipt of 0.5 of a whole-teacher equivalent (11 teaching hours) for students requiring support with learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy. An additional three whole-teacher equivalents (66.5 teaching hours) are provided for students identified with a range of low-incidence and high-incidence needs. A separate allocation of .45 of a whole teacher equivalent (9.90 teaching hours) is also given to the school to attend to the needs of newcomer students who are learning English as an additional language (EAL). At the time of the inspection it was reported that the small number of EAL students enrolled were not present in the school.

Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, while a suitable balance is struck between individual prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum. This support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner and includes the creation of a small class group, individual student withdrawal, small group withdrawal and sophisticated team-teaching arrangements, where two teachers work together with students in one classroom. The school has appointed a co-ordinator for special educational needs, who is currently on leave, and who has a recognised qualification in special needs education. This work is undertaken in a voluntary capacity and is not part of the post structure in the school. The school is actively supporting the application of another staff member to access similar postgraduate qualifications. This staff member currently co-ordinates provision in a voluntary capacity and in consultation with senior management.
A core team of teachers works closely with each other and on occasions with colleagues to deliver support for learning in a variety of responsive and flexible ways. This core team possesses a range of subject disciplines, the majority of whom have a mathematical background. Notwithstanding the good lines of communication and the use of team-teaching, provision would be enhanced by a member of the English department forming part of the team that delivers such support to students. In all cases it would be important that the core team of teachers are afforded opportunities to access specific additional professional learning via online courses such as those available at www.sess.ie. Such professional learning can in turn be shared with other colleagues. The school is also aware that it is important that this team of teachers continue to teach a range of subject levels across the school week and not be typecast as teaching only a particular group of students or a particular subject level.

The school has two appointed special needs assistants who possess relevant qualifications and who have also accessed additional training. Their contribution to the quality of experience encountered by a number of students is acknowledged by students and staff. The manner in which the special needs assistants perform their non-teaching duties and the way in which they interact with staff and students reflects well upon all concerned. As with their teaching colleagues, special needs assistants should also be supported in obtaining additional learning opportunities relevant to the duties they are undertaking or may be planning to undertake with new entrants to the school.

The school has installed a new lift and provides five small classrooms for individual and small group withdrawal. Further investment in information and communication technology (ICT) facilities including printers and software packages is recommended. Such investment will assist with learning and teaching and also promote students’ sense of belonging by displaying their redrafted work within the classroom and possibly on the school website. Both teaching and non-teaching staff are actively involved in a range of impressive extracurricular and co-curricular activities which are open to all students. Such activities are valued by students and are often significantly important in enhancing student self-esteem and their sense of belonging in the school. The leadership shown by senior management and others in this regard is commendable. Such support assists in promoting an atmosphere conducive to learning and it was noted that, throughout the two-day inspection, students were found to be friendly, confident, and happy to engage in conversation.

In forming class groups the school pursues a model which merits review. In first year, three classes are formed on the basis of mixed ability with a smaller class being formed from students who are seen to require additional support. This smaller class studies one modern language rather than two modern languages. In second and third year, classes are formed on a similar basis with one ‘top class’, two ‘mixed ability classes’ and one smaller class. It is recommended that the school give consideration to all classes being of mixed-ability in first year and that concurrent timetabling be introduced in English, Gaeilge and Mathematics for all classes in second and third year. The admirable existing team-teaching practices may assist in introducing such changes by bridging the movement from small class to mixed ability. Apart from the obvious benefit of being part of a group, this joint provision offers a level of support which meets and often exceeds the recommended individualised provision as per the relevant circulars.

In reviewing such structures the school should also clarify and document which students are in receipt of exemptions from the study of Gaeilge, as per circular M10/94. The less than ideal practice of students with exemptions remaining in Irish classes can be best avoided by taking account of class groupings and additional provision when constructing the master timetable. A similar practice should be undertaken with regard to outlining clear criteria when deciding...
whether students should no longer pursue a modern language. Such decisions need to be taken in consultation with parents and students, bearing in mind the pleasure and value that learning a modern language brings to the learner and the implications such decisions may have on future career opportunities.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION
The school engages in a range of activities that support effective planning and preparation. Good lines of communication exist with the primary schools and with parents. The school enrolment policy is well written and forms part of a detailed admissions policy which welcomes students with special educational needs and emphasises that the school’s assessment test ‘has no bearing on whether to enrol a student or not’. Parents and guardians who may have specific requirements for students are encouraged to contact the school well in advance of enrolment so that possible resource requirements can be sought. In encouraging such communication with the school the special educational needs section of the school’s admission policy would benefit from clearly stating that the procedures outlined are undertaken without prejudice.

It was reported that, in the main, additional resources are allocated to the school in a timely manner which facilitates planning and preparation. Timetabling practices in the school are generally good in that the timetable takes cognisance of the need to offer students with special educational needs consistency of interaction with teachers across the week and from year to year. To further extend the team-teaching practices, the input of additional resources will have to take place at the time of the completion of the master timetable. The practice of assigning as much of the available resources simultaneously with other staffing allocation will also assist in providing parallel classes for students not pursuing Gaeilge and/or a modern language. In devising the school timetable, regular meeting times, within available resources, should be provided to facilitate meetings between the co-ordinator and members of the core team, as well as meetings with other members of the pastoral-care team. These meeting should be seen to further support rather than replace the many fine examples of informal interaction between the personnel concerned.

In light of the significant additional teaching hours being provided, it is recommended that the school devise a register of students in receipt of additional support. Such a register will assist in tracking how the resources are allocated and how the resources impact upon the quality of students’ learning. Furthermore, such a register would assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, such as team-teaching, upon the overall additional hours allocated. This register can in turn be informed and inform the very good individualised planning being undertaken for students with special educational needs. Attendance at a recent professional development session organised by the Special Educational Needs Support Service (SESS) has been used to very good effect and the school is commended for the manner in which it is seeking to construct collective plans for individual needs.

Liaison between subject departments and the core members of the special educational needs support team is good and the continued recognition and development of the key role of the mainstream teacher will assist in improving the quality of planning and preparation engaged in by the school. To further support the mainstream teacher, consideration should also be given to providing whole-staff professional learning opportunities for teachers on general topics such as inclusion or more specific topics such as specific learning difficulties or autism. Contact with the aforementioned SESS may assist in this regard as may the continued alignment between the promotion of inclusive practices and school improvement via subject-department planning and
future engagement with school-development planning. Extending team-teaching practices to involve other staff members also merits consideration.

While the school does not have a formal documented special educational needs policy it does have a number of documents which could be used to good effect in formulating a policy document. The school may wish to consider an overarching inclusion policy which can incorporate the diversity of needs presenting and the diversity of responses being undertaken to meet such needs. The school’s existing policy on equality and admissions policy are helpful in this regard as is the Department of Education and Science publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007). In formulating a policy, the school should consider aspects of policy and practice that might be further shared with staff members by way of a staff handbook. Here too, roles and responsibilities for teachers and special needs assistants, as well as practices and procedures, could be made accessible and made clear to all who contribute to the quality of education in the school. Detailed reference to the teaching and learning practices engaged by teachers would also serve both documents well, as would clear agreed understandings on such concepts as ‘inclusion’, ‘whole-school approach’, ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’. Such a handbook may incorporate, as deemed appropriate by the school, some of the previous suggestions and recommendations in this report.

Individual teacher planning and preparation, as witnessed during the inspection, was of a high quality and impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons visited was, in all cases, of a high standard. A total of seven lessons were evaluated over the course of the two-day inspection. These lessons ranged across junior and senior cycle programmes and focused on English, Mathematics, Computer Studies, and Biology. Classes were formed on the basis of mainstream classes, team-teaching classes, small group withdrawal and individual withdrawal. Teachers were well prepared for their lessons and students were engaged in their learning.

Teachers’ knowledge of the subject content and of the students in their classroom ensured that learning was well paced and appropriately differentiated. Differentiation took many forms and was most noticeable when students were given tasks and teachers engaged with students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. Such interaction informed the teacher of the learning that was taking place and assisted in framing the remainder of the lesson.

The Computer Studies lesson recognised the diversity of ability within the class and students were encouraged to work at a pace that was suitable for them. Student-teacher interaction was of a high standard with students equally comfortable in responding to questions as well as posing questions. The lesson was structured in a manner that focused on improving students’ computer skills against set criteria. Learning was also enhanced by the effective manner in which students were also encouraged to weave other aspects of their curriculum and their personalities into the activities.

The Biology lesson began with an outline of the lesson aims and students were encouraged to seek clarification before engaging in an experiment. Good use of visuals and of higher-order questioning by the teacher ensured that students were engaged in the lesson and eager to determine the outcome of the lesson. Good teacher-student relations were mirrored by good student-student interaction and instinctive co-operation. The lesson finished with a recapitulation
of the work undertaken with students being assisted with some of the keywords associated with the lesson.

The classes devoted to aspects of English and Mathematics used a range of delivery modes including team-teaching, small group withdrawal and individual withdrawal. The interplay between literacy and numeracy skills was not lost on either teacher or student. Good lines of communication ensured that, where additional support was provided in the form of small group or individual withdrawal, consistency of topic and methodologies prevailed across all lessons. In Mathematics, the use of ‘BEMIDAS’ strategies was effective, while in English lessons students were encouraged to revisit keywords that were previously used in the mainstream lesson. The combination of withdrawal and team-teaching arrangements were seen to work well in maintaining consistency of approach. New topics were introduced to all students and teachers, with withdrawal taking place thereafter. When asked, students commented that they liked this combined approach towards supporting their learning.

A significant aspect of the individual and small group withdrawal was the amount of positive dialogue between students and teachers. Judicious use of praise and encouragement created optimal learning environments where students learned in a safe and relaxed atmosphere. This was also found in the team-taught lesson with students commenting that team-teaching gave them greater opportunities to ask questions and that “more was covered” in a team-taught lesson. The school is encouraged to consider how more use can be made of this mode of support, particularly in light of the simultaneously positive impact it is having on students’ learning and teachers’ professional learning.

The quality of learning and teaching observed was, in no small way, due to teachers’ understanding of the importance of building relationships with students. Such work, as witnessed during the course of the inspection, is done in class where lessons are devised in order for students to succeed, but also through positive engagement along the corridors and through extracurricular activities. This positive learning environment also promoted student self-advocacy which in turn promoted students’ motivation to learn and persistence with learning.

Recommendations in relation to teaching and learning are mainly framed around extending the good practices witnessed during the course of the inspection. The school may wish to use the aforementioned staff handbook as a location for highlighting some of the good practices witnessed in relation to teacher questioning, co-operative learning, formative assessment and use of graphic organisers. Team-teaching offers in-house opportunities to see these aspects of pedagogy in action while external supports services such as the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) may assist in adopting a whole school approach to such topics as co-operative learning or assessment for learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school engages in a range of effective assessment practices. Daily classroom observation and interaction with students combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. Students’ progress, attainment and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis. Parents are facilitated, on request, to meet with teachers. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and Christmas and summer results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track students’ progress.

Standardised tests have begun to be introduced for students enrolling in first year and this practice should be followed by relevant diagnostic testing where student achievement, particularly in the
areas of literacy and numeracy can be determined. Such testing will inform teaching and learning strategies. The previously suggested reconfiguration of class formation towards mixed ability in the junior cycle would be guided by these tests as well as by teacher observation. These assessments can in turn be used to retest students at a later date where progress can be tracked and shared appropriately. Such practice will support a whole-school approach to improving learning outcomes, particularly if the outcomes are suitably shared, interpreted and discussed with colleagues.

The school is mindful of students who are identified as exceptionally gifted and talented in a range of activities. The school reports good support from external agencies in consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist. The school also adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). In general, it is reported that students are facilitated in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodations provided and are assisted in accessing these when they sit their pre-examinations. It would be important that students continue to be facilitated with such accommodations and where possible the personnel involved in the state examinations are also involved in any preparatory activities.

Students’ work, including copies and journals, were in general well maintained. Students’ written work was found to be regularly corrected, on occasions signed and dated with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning. Knowledge of the learner and what was to be learned allowed judicious responses by teachers to students’ efforts, both verbal and written. Future policy development in the area of differentiating homework and assessment are encouraged. As witnessed, the good practice of team-teaching would appear to particularly facilitate immediate assessment, feedback and guidance to students. Such classes allow multiple opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons visited was, in all cases, of a high standard and this was in no small way due to teachers understanding the importance of building relationships with students.
- The school has an appointed co-ordinator for special educational needs and a core team of teachers work closely with each other and on occasions with colleagues to deliver support for learning in a variety of responsive and flexible ways.
- Responsive and responsible modes of support are provided and advanced with sophisticated team-teaching arrangements in place.
- The school engages in a range of activities that support effective planning and preparation.
- Liaison between subject departments and the core members of the special educational needs support team is good and the continued recognition of the key role of the mainstream teachers will assist in improving the quality of planning and preparation engaged in by the school.
- The school is seeking to construct collective plans for individual needs.
- Both teaching and non-teaching staff are actively involved in a range of impressive extracurricular and co-curricular activities which are open to all students.
- The school engages in a range of effective assessment practices.
• Standardised tests have begun to be introduced for students enrolling in first year and this practice should be followed by relevant diagnostic testing where student achievement, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy can be determined.

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 give consideration to all classes being of mixed-ability in first year and that concurrent timetabling be introduced in English, Gaeilge and Mathematics for all classes in second and third year.
• It is recommended that individual and whole-school professional learning continue to be encouraged and supported by the school.
• In light of the significant additional teaching hours being provided it is recommended that the school devise a register of students in receipt of additional support.
• The school is encouraged to consider an overarching inclusion policy which can incorporate the diversity of needs presenting and the diversity of responses being undertaken to meet such needs.
• To assist the voluntary nature of the work of co-ordination, regular meeting times should be factored into the construction of the master timetable.

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

Published May 2011
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board appreciates the efficiency and courtesy of the Inspectorate in carrying out the subject inspection. The Board commends the work of the teachers involved in teaching students with Special Educational Needs in St. Munchin’s College. The report is a very positive report on the excellent teaching provided to students in the college, and affirms the work of the teachers in the department. The Board would also like to acknowledge the fact that the role of the co-ordinator has been a role undertaken in a voluntary capacity over the last number of years, and the excellent work that has been done in the development of the Department by all the teachers involved.

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

In the 2010/2011 school year, 2 members of the English department are involved as part of the team that delivers support to students.
In 2010/2011 a second member of the team involved in teaching students with Special Educational needs has undertaken the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs in Mary Immaculate College, and a third member of the team has been accepted on the course for the coming academic year.
Through the provision of ICT grant funding in the 2010/2011 school year, computers and digital projectors will have been installed in all classrooms by the end of the school year. A small number of inter-active whiteboards will also be installed.
The school is examining the possibility of all first classes being mixed ability in 2011/2012. Concurrent timetabling of Irish, English and Mathematics exists for 3 out of 4 classes in Second and Third year. The school will examine the possibility of concurrent timetabling for all classes in the 2011/2012 academic year.
Diagnostic testing is currently carried out by those teachers currently trained in the area of testing. School management together with the department teachers will look at the development of a register of students and resources in addition to the existing documentation. Consideration will be given to factoring regular meetings into the construction of the master timetable.

The Board will carefully consider all the recommendations contained in the inspection report, with a view to their implementation, in light of the needs of the whole school and in consultation with the partners in the college community.