

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs  
REPORT**

**Coláiste Chraobh Abhann,  
Kilcoole, County Wicklow  
Roll number: 76076M**

**Date of inspection: 13 December 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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following an evaluation of the provision for students with special educational needs in Coláiste Chraobh Abhann. 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 special educational needs 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 Chraobh Abhann opened as a community college under the patronage of County Wicklow Vocational Education Committee (VEC) in 2003. The college is co-educational and multi-denominational with a current enrolment of 584 students. It is a caring and welcoming school and a whole-school approach towards inclusion has evolved under the positive leadership of the principal. The college caters effectively for students with a wide range of abilities and has an open admissions policy which is outlined in a lucid document recently ratified by the board of management. A second clear document outlines the procedures for enrolling students in the college's designated unit for students with Asperger Syndrome which opened in 2004. The college has been allocated 103 teaching resource hours to support students with diagnosed low and high incidence special needs as well as 15.4 teaching hours for students requiring learning support. These hours are used appropriately. The special educational needs co-ordinator meets with principal each September to review the usage of allocated hours. This is a positive initiative.

County Wicklow VEC has produced a wide-ranging and comprehensive policy document on special educational needs (SEN) which applies to all students attending their schools. At the time of the evaluation, a working group was reviewing the document in light of current college practices under the School Development Planning process with a view to future ratification, with minor amendments to account for local customs and practices. A comprehensive staged induction programme featuring multiple contacts with the parents of students with special educational needs and the feeder primary schools supports the transfer of students entering the college. The range of provision includes individual and small group tuition which focuses on literacy, numeracy and subject support and in-class support through team teaching which is established in first year English and Geography and is currently being piloted in a number of mathematics classes.

The college has introduced mixed ability classes for all first year students this year. This is good practice. In later years, a system of banding for core subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics still prevails. In second and third year, additional mathematics classes are provided in some subject band as a further support to students. Class organisation at senior cycle is dictated by student selection of programme, subject and level. All students have access to a full curriculum and a range of programmes at senior cycle including Transition year, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

Students who may require learning support are identified during the enrolment process using information from their previous learning history as well as the results of the college placement tests. If these students are also exempt from the study of Irish, they attend for learning support in small groups during Irish. These groups have targeted lessons dealing with literacy and numeracy and key priority learning needs. Students who study Irish are withdrawn in small groups from selected classes. This process is rightly given careful consideration to ensure that there is minimal impact on student learning in any one subject area. In situations where SEN-qualified staff are not available to provide literacy and numeracy support to students with special educational needs, the college endeavours to timetable English or mathematics subject specialists respectively.

A special duties' post has been designated for the work of co-ordinating and overseeing the provision for students with special educational needs and those requiring learning support. A range of appropriate duties have been agreed for the special educational needs co-ordinator and are listed in the schedule of posts of responsibilities. The co-ordinator chairs the special educational needs team meetings and liaises with parents, college management and staff, and external agencies. The special educational needs co-ordinator attends the English and Mathematics subject department meetings. She maintains registers of students with special educational needs, students receiving learning support, those tested as gifted, and those students exempt from Irish. She keeps records of all meetings and telephone/e-mail contact, provides copies of relevant documentation to other personnel as appropriate, and submits an annual report. All of this is good practice.

The special educational needs team, led by the co-ordinator, consists of five experienced teachers who hold relevant post-graduate qualifications. These teachers provide the majority of the provision but are assisted by a small number of teachers without special educational needs qualifications. Formal special educational needs team meetings are held at least three times each year with more frequent informal meetings. The formal meetings are minuted, with some occurring outside of college hours. A flowchart clearly shows the working relationships between the special educational needs co-ordinator, management, the staff involved in providing support, other college personnel, and the students and their parents. A special educational needs calendar effectively summarises and sequences the roles, responsibilities and activities related to the provision. The college has established good procedures for monitoring, reviewing and evaluating its provision for students with special educational needs.

Staffing in the unit for students with Asperger Syndrome consists of two well-qualified teachers and two special needs assistants. One of the teachers acts as co-ordinator and takes responsibility for organising and overseeing all aspects of the provision for the students enrolled in the unit. Each August, the students and their parents meet with the ASD co-ordinator at the end before the college opens to discuss each students needs. Although enrolled in the unit, students with Asperger Syndrome attend the majority of their lessons in mainstream classes with their peers. The unit staff work in the unit and in mainstream classrooms and meet regularly to plan the support programme. The unit itself consists of two small, joined classrooms with designated areas

for teaching and administration. The unit stores a range of teaching resource materials and functions as a respite centre for students.

It is college practice to identify potentially academically-gifted students using their previous learning history and the results of the placement testing. These students are then encouraged to study subjects at higher levels and are supported to engage in activities such as debating and maths, science and art competitions. There is no written policy in this regard and so it is recommended that the college document the existing good practices and develop and draft a whole-school policy to guide the identification and support of gifted and talented students. The publication *Gifted and Talented Pupils: Guidelines for Teachers* (CEA/NCCA, 2007) can provide some useful suggestions in developing policy and practice.

Mainstream teachers are well supported in their endeavours to provide inclusive education for the students of Coláiste Chraobh Abhann by both the members of the special educational needs team and the management. Induction of new staff features the provision of information on creating inclusive classrooms. A briefing session on special educational needs is held for all staff each September. Pertinent information on all students with special educational needs, including all individual education plans, is accessible on the college's central computer system. Mainstream teachers have ready access to the advice and support of the special educational needs co-ordinator and can refer students to the special educational needs team for investigation.

The college has been allocated seven fulltime special needs assistant (SNA) posts. Two SNAs are assigned to the Asperger Syndrome unit and the remaining five are assigned to support specific individuals with care needs. The SNAs meet regularly with their respective co-ordinators and attend staff meetings. With the SEN and ASD co-ordinators and the college management, the SNAs have contributed to the development of draft guidelines to inform their work. The final version should provide clearer guidelines regarding interaction with teachers in the classroom and clarify that SNAs should always work under the direction of the class teacher. The SNAs were seen to be providing appropriate support and intervention for the targeted students and to systematically keep records of observed behaviours and incidents.

Relevant continuing professional development in the area of special educational needs is supported by college management and by the county VEC. Individual staff members have attended a range of relevant short courses and all of the college staff have received input on relevant topics such as mixed ability teaching and the role of the SNA. Membership of the Irish Learning Support Association and the Irish Association for Teachers in Special Education, and attendance at their conferences is funded by the college. Planning for future CPD events should be informed by an audit of staff training needs. Possible topics for consideration include inclusive teaching practices such as active learning, differentiation, co-operative teaching and co-operative learning.

The college has a purpose-built resource room which functions as an administration centre for the special educational needs co-ordinator and a storage facility for student files and teaching materials as well as a small tuition room. The resource room has a small library of books for use by students as well as SEN-related publications for staff use. The college has a good range of information and communications technology with three computer rooms, personal computers in most classrooms, printers, scanners and relevant software. There are data projectors in all classrooms and some rooms also have interactive whiteboards. A lot of teaching resources are accessed through the internet. The college maintains close links with a range of external agencies including the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Special

Education, the Health Service Executive, Aspire, Beechpark Services, Lucena Clinic and Enable Ireland.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Individual and class planning are both informed by pertinent information on students which is provided to the staff by the special educational needs team. Teachers are successfully encouraged to adopt a student-centred approach to education to cater for the needs of individual students while fostering the achievement of potential. A document known as a Group Profile, with information on each individual student's learning abilities and needs as well as the group's needs, is prepared for teachers by the special educational needs co-ordinator to aid their planning for each learning support group they will be teaching.

A positive process to develop and implement individual education plans (IEPs) for all students diagnosed with low or high incidence special educational needs is led by the special educational needs co-ordinator and supported by the special educational needs team members. These IEPs are in effect profiles of each student. They provide background information and identify strengths, needs and potential difficulties for each student. They note recommendations from the student's psychological report and suggest teaching strategies and resources. These profiles are useful in helping teachers to plan interventions but they require development. The learning targets in these profiles tend to be generic and non-specific in nature rendering them inadequate for measuring achievement. Learning and behaviour targets must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). When targets are SMART they are more constructive in directing a teacher's planning and they also provide a tangible means of monitoring and recording outcomes. It is recommended that the previous good work in developing the IEP process be built on to further develop the quality and functionality of the individual education plans. Advice in this regard is available in the publications *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* (NCSE, 2006) and *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007)

The IEP process for the students in the ASD unit is led by the ASD co-ordinator with the collaboration of the students and their parents. These IEPs set targets, list strategies, materials and resources, name personnel involved, and give the date when the interventions started. They are reviewed mid-year and at the end of the year when the outcome of each target is recorded. The IEPs targets often featured non-academic areas such as the development of self-management skills and social-communication skills. At the time of the evaluation, the IEP targets were not being shared with the mainstream teachers. As the targets involve behaviours which have a direct bearing on inclusion and class participation, it is recommended that one or two targets for each student be shared with their mainstream teachers. Resource teachers should ensure that each student's mainstream class teachers are aware of relevant IEP targets for each student so that they can reinforce and reward desired behaviours and thus promote the generalisation and maintenance of the skills learned in the resource class.

Subject department planning for the inclusion of students with special educational needs is inconsistent across the college. It is recommended that every subject department review its planning for inclusion at the earliest opportunity. Subject planning should also consider how the development of literacy and numeracy can be promoted in each subject area through whole-subject and whole-school approaches across the curriculum. 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 special educational needs co-ordinator could be given an advisory role in this work.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Eleven classrooms were visited during the evaluation. Lesson observations took place in inclusive mainstream classes and in individual and small group tuition classes featuring direct instruction in literacy or numeracy, or subject support. These lessons spanned junior and senior cycle programmes and included English, French, Mathematics, Science, Geography, Home Economics, and Hotel Catering and Tourism. The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to excellent. Observed lessons were well organised and purposeful. Information and communications technology (ICT) and graphic organisers were both used competently by many teachers to generate visual and graphic imagery to enhance learning. There was also good use of repetition, reinforcement and review and an effective use of unplanned opportunities to extend general knowledge and vocabulary. All teachers created supportive learning environments. They were patient and caring, yet maintained high expectations for achievement. Students were actively engaged in their learning. Literacy and numeracy development are supported by paired reading and paired maths initiatives in the college.

The college is piloting team teaching in Geography and English and, more recently, in Mathematics. Two teachers planning and working together in a classroom to provide instruction can be an effective method for creating inclusive classrooms. The college is encouraged to review current practice to ensure that the maximum outcome is gained from co-operative teaching. It would be beneficial for all staff to receive some professional development in this area. In some mainstream classes, teachers capably differentiated the content and expected outcomes for targeted students with special educational needs

Subject support was characterised by direct instruction and the review of skills and knowledge first encountered in mainstream lessons. Teachers responded to individual needs by structuring work to develop and reinforce understanding. The level and style of each teacher's questioning was guided by their knowledge of the individual students. Teachers facilitated the acquisition and use of subject-specific language and gave sufficient wait time for students to process questions and formulate answers.

A number of students are identified as having literacy difficulties and receive targeted intervention. Observed lessons focussed on reading comprehension activities. While these sessions provided practice of reading comprehension skills, teachers did not introduce or encourage students to use any of the many cognitive strategies available to support comprehension. It is recommended that a whole-school policy on literacy be developed. The policy should concern the identification of and the intervention for students with specific literacy deficits.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A wide range of assessment and reporting practices are in place to support planning and to track progress. Standardised tests of reading and reasoning abilities are administered to entering students. The results are used to inform planning and the formation of mixed ability classes. The college should investigate accessing the results of incoming students' reading and maths achievement test results directly from the feeder primary schools. A new initiative by the college is the administration of additional literacy tests to all first year students and the intention to re-test students attending support classes annually. This pro-active measure will assist the early

identification and intervention of those with literacy difficulties and provide valuable data essential to monitoring the progress of targeted students.

Summative evaluation takes place on a whole-school basis four times each year. Individual teachers conduct formative evaluation more regularly during instruction to assess for learning and to inform planning. Whole-school planning documentation supports the use of Assessment for Learning strategies in all classrooms. There is a whole-school homework policy and individual teachers were seen to conform to this through setting a variety of homework tasks, and collecting and correcting set homework. Support teachers maintain portfolios of student work. This is a valuable means of recording progress. Achievements are efficiently recorded and reported to parents and students through the student journal, college reports, and parent-teacher meetings for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students and parent-student-teacher meetings for 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year students. The college is commended for the latter initiative which encourages students to take some responsibility for their education. The IEP meetings also serve to inform parents and students of progress. The ASD co-ordinator issues student progress reports to parents prior to IEP meetings.

Any student potentially requiring reasonable accommodations in the state examinations is interviewed, assessed and advised by the special educational needs team. A member of the special education needs team submits the application to the State Examinations Commission and support teachers provide any required training in the use of the accommodation. The college then does its best to facilitate the use of the accommodation in formal end of term exams. Language teachers are made aware of all students granted waivers from spelling and grammar before the mock examinations so that this can be reflected in the marking. These are all commendable practices.

Inclusive assessment is an approach to assessment where policy, procedures and practice are designed to promote the learning of all students as far as possible. Assessment should support and enhance the successful participation and inclusion of all students. Coláiste Chraobh Abhann is an inclusive school which implements a wide range of quality procedures and practices. It would be a useful exercise to document and review the aims and outcomes of the college's assessment policy, procedures and practices to ensure that they are as inclusive as possible.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Coláiste Chraobh Abhann is a caring and welcoming school. A whole-school approach towards inclusion has evolved under the positive leadership of the principal.
- The range of provision includes individual and small group tuition and in-class support through team teaching. All students have access to a full curriculum and a range of programmes.
- The college has established good procedures for monitoring, reviewing and evaluating its provision for students with special educational needs.
- The special educational needs team led by the co-ordinator consists of five experienced teachers who hold relevant post-graduate qualifications.
- The college hosts a unit for students with Asperger Syndrome which is staffed by two well-qualified teachers, one of whom acts as co-ordinator and two special needs assistants.
- Mainstream teachers are well supported in their endeavours to provide inclusive education for the students of Coláiste Chraobh Abhann by both the members of the special educational needs team and the management.

- Relevant continuing professional development in the area of special educational needs is supported by college management and by the county VEC.
- A positive process to develop and implement individual education plans is led by the special educational needs co-ordinator and the Asperger Syndrome unit co-ordinator.
- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to excellent; observed lessons were well organised and purposeful.
- A wide range of assessment and reporting practices are in place to support planning and to track progress.

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

- The college should document the existing good practices and develop and draft a whole-school policy to guide the identification and support of gifted and talented students.
- It is recommended that the previous good work be built on to further develop the quality and functionality of the individual education plans and that IEP targets related to classroom participation and inclusion be shared with mainstream teachers.
- All subject departments should engage in a review of their planning for inclusion.
- It is recommended that a whole-school policy on literacy be developed.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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 at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann is very satisfied with the report on the Evaluation of Special Education Needs provision at the school issued by the Department of education and Skills Inspectorate as a result of an inspection held on Friday 10<sup>th</sup> and Monday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

The Board acknowledges the very positive comments in the report and the identification of strengths by the inspector in relation to the provision for Special Educational Needs at the school. The SEN Co-ordinator and SEN team feel encouraged and valued by the very definite strengths which were identified as commended or highly commended practices and structures by the inspector throughout the report.

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

All relevant partners have had an opportunity to review and discuss this inspection report. A full and comprehensive review of the recommendations has taken place and an action plan will be developed to ensure the recommendations are addressed under the School Development Planning process. The SEN Team will be central to the implementation of this plan.

Finally the school would like to thank the visiting inspector for his positive feedback during the inspection process. The SEN co-ordinator and SEN Team found the inspection process and resulting report to be an acknowledgement of their enthusiasm and commitment to providing high quality support for SEN students at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann.