An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Tallaght Community School
Balrothery, Tallaght, Dublin 24
Roll number: 91335U

Date of inspection: 8 March 2011
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following an evaluation of the provision for students with special educational needs in Tallaght Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of provision and the quality of the teaching and learning in Special Educational Needs and makes recommendations for further development in this area of 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, the deputy principal and the co-ordinator of the provision for students with special educational needs. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Tallaght Community School is rightly proud to be the first community school to open in Ireland. The school has developed considerably since its founding in 1972 and, at the time of this evaluation, was catering for 611 students. Enrolment includes significant numbers of students with general learning disabilities, but also students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, physical disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and emotional and behavioural disorders. These students, diagnosed with both low and high incidence needs, have been allocated 105 teaching hours. In addition, a number receive support from a special needs assistant. The school also has a learning support allocation of 44 teaching hours which is used to support students with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The school receives positive support from its special educational needs organiser and its National Educational Psychological Service psychologist and maintains strong links with the local community.

The school’s admissions policy and practices are open and welcoming to all students. The school’s mission statement accurately describes the school as co-educational, multi-denominational and inclusive and pledges to admit students regardless of their religion, social class or educational needs. Both management and staff display a positive attitude towards supporting students with special educational needs. The staff is committed and professional and the students are well-cared for. Allocated resources are used appropriately to support students with additional needs. Students from Tallaght Community School participate in a range of external programmes such as the Young Scientist, Young Social Innovators, and the Trinity Access Programme and recently the school has astutely targeted for development processes to identify and support students who are gifted and talented.

The special educational needs policy which was created collaboratively by the staff is currently awaiting ratification by the board of management. The document is brief but it clearly states the school’s philosophy and underlines its commitment to providing appropriately for students with
special educational needs. It is recommended that a supplementary document be created to outline
the organisation of the provision and to provide details of the procedures and criteria for selection
and discontinuation of support as well as how each student receives support. This document
should also delineate the roles and responsibilities of personnel, including the special educational
needs co-ordinator and team, the special needs assistants, the resource and mainstream teachers,
and the management.

There is a proactive system in place to support the transfer of students from their primary schools.
The school maintains good contacts with its sixteen feeder schools. Transition year students act as
mentors and visit the feeder schools with the special educational needs co-ordinator and the
school completion programme co-ordinator. Extra meetings are held for the parents of students
with special educational needs. Class placement for junior cycle students is determined by the
information which is gathered at entry and initial test results. Incoming students are placed in two
bands. The upper band comprises three streamed class groups. The lower band consists of a small
class of low achieving students and one school-created special class composed of students with
significant learning difficulties who follow the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP).
Class placement is reviewed each spring in light of the results of teacher observations, and the
results of class curriculum tests and standardised reasoning tests. This is good practice.

Most students with assessed special educational needs are placed in the two lower streams. The
students in the lower band are timetabled for extra English and maths classes but do not study a
modern foreign language. They are also all exempt from the study of Irish. The students in the
second stream do two weekly classes of non-exam science, while the students in the lowest
stream do not study science. Instead, they attend two classes of activities designed to develop a
range of social and personal learning skills. There is a danger in ability-based grouping, as
students in lower streams are vulnerable to making less progress, becoming de-motivated and
developing anti-school attitudes. The school must be ever vigilant to be responsive to any
emerging negative effects of streaming and regularly re-examine the philosophy behind their
ability grouping strategy, the accuracy with which groupings are made for the purposes intended,
the differentiations being made in content, process and product, and the teaching methodologies
employed. It is strongly recommended that the school review its current streaming practices and,
in particular, consider the many benefits of mixed-ability grouping for all students, but especially
for junior cycle students in the upper band.

At senior cycle, the school offers a choice between the established Leaving Certificate (LC) and
the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Most senior students with special educational needs enrol
in the LCA programme, where they continue to receive support via team teaching, resource
teaching, and extra classes for English and Mathematics. Transition Year (TY) is mandatory for
all students except for those proceeding to the LCA programme. TY and LC students requiring
support attend resource classes.

Students in Tallaght Community School benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular activities. All students, including those with special educational needs, are actively encouraged to participate in activities such as the school musical, the talent competition and a range of sports and physical activities. Targeted junior cycle students are encouraged to attend lunchtime clubs led by teachers and volunteer senior cycle students. The clubs offer activities designed to develop social and language skills and foster friendships. Students in the lower stream also benefit from a range of schemes such as a homework club supported by the DEIS programme. In addition, the school completion programme co-ordinator focuses on retention and works with potential early school leavers, some of whom include students with special educational needs. The school
endeavours to proactively assist students in transitioning from school to suitable continuing education and training placements such as the National Learning Network.

The school has appointed an assistant principal to co-ordinate the provision for students with special educational needs. His duties include overseeing the provision and allocation of support, liaising with management, staff, parents and students, and maintaining student records, test results and reports. There is also a named special educational needs team, but at the time of the evaluation this team did not meet formally on a regular basis. It is suggested that more frequent meetings be scheduled to enable the group to function as a team which can collaboratively plan and guide the development of the provision. An agenda for each meeting should issue and minutes of meetings should be recorded and copied to the management.

Only two teachers hold post-graduate qualifications in the areas of learning support or special needs education and one of these has recently moved into management. In addition, there has only been a limited occurrence of relevant professional development for staff. As positive outcomes for students with special educational needs is highly dependant on the quality of teaching available and it is one of the aims of the school’s special educational needs policy to develop staff expertise in supporting students with special educational needs, it is recommended that management encourage and support one or more additional teachers to acquire an appropriate post-graduate qualification. The school should also seek professional development opportunities for the whole-school staff and individuals as required through contact with the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie). An audit by management of staff needs regarding provision for students with special educational needs in areas such as differentiation, inclusion strategies and co-operative learning would inform this action.

The school currently employs five special needs assistants (SNAs) to support students with identified care needs. All of the SNAs are qualified and professional in their work. They are clear about their roles, particularly in relation to assisting curriculum access and promoting independence. They keep notebooks to record observations and incidents and meet with the special educational needs co-ordinator twice each term to review their work.

**Planning and Preparation**

Tallaght Community School is engaged in a systematic and positive approach to planning and preparation. All teachers are involved collaboratively in the development of school-wide policies and in the development of their respective subject department plans. There is consultation with the student council, the parents and the trustees before the ratification of a policy by the board of management. All policies and plans have been uploaded to the school’s moodle system. In this electronic format, the special educational needs policy and the subject department policies contain links to a variety of websites which are useful sources of reference and information. A number of subject department plans were reviewed and all of them provide useful information on the successful inclusion of students with special educational needs.

Support for mainstream teachers is provided by the special educational needs co-ordinator. The co-ordinator collates pertinent information such as psychological reports, test results, observations and teaching suggestions in student folders. These are circulated amongst all staff teaching the students. Teachers sign off that they have read the folder, and they can have access to the folders at any time. Information on the additional needs of incoming students is disseminated orally at the beginning of each new school year. Students’ individual learning needs are also discussed at English subject department and JCSP team meetings.
Some good examples of well-structured long- and short-term lesson planning were seen, although there was variation in how teachers plan. Overall class-level planning requires development for consistency across classrooms. Some poorer examples of planning merely listed general areas of work with the activities to be undertaken and the materials to be used. In these examples there was no reference to differentiation or individual needs. This is insufficient in planning for inclusion. It is recommended therefore that the school engage with an individual planning process for the students identified as having special educational needs, beginning with developing educational plans for students with more complex needs. This process should be based on individual needs and be carried out in consultation with the students and their parents. It is suggested that the school develop a template for this purpose to provide a means to record a short profile of each student and a statement of their abilities and priority learning needs. Teachers can then use this template to list specific learning targets for each student and use it to inform their lesson planning. The development and use of a template to create group education plans for students with common needs and goals should also be considered. The Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines (DES Inspectorate, 2007) and the Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process (NCSE, 2006) will be useful references for this enterprise.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Twelve lessons were observed during the two-day evaluation. These lessons reflected the different models of provision available in the school. Both senior and junior cycle classes were visited, featuring instruction in English, mathematics and ICT. The overall quality of teaching and learning in observed lessons was good. In the best lessons, instruction was individualised and based on student needs. Teachers began lessons by sharing learning outcomes and a variety of methodologies including direct instruction, active learning and differentiated questioning were employed. Less satisfactory lessons were characterised by teacher-dominated discussion and insufficient time given for students to ask or answer questions. Good teacher-student relations were a feature of all classrooms. Students were respectful of staff and were appreciative of the help and support provided. Students were well-behaved and engaged with their learning. Teachers made good use of praise to motivate and encourage students and provided sufficient opportunities to ensure consolidation of learning.

In all visited classes high levels of support were provided by staff. An extra teacher is timetabled for many class groups, particularly in English and mathematics, to facilitate co-operative or team teaching. In most of these classes, the two teachers worked in tandem, with a subject teacher leading the lesson while the second teacher circulated and provided individualised support. A variety of formats can be used when two teachers work together in a classroom and the school is advised to research this model of provision thoroughly and to further its implementation. A DVD recently produced by Co. Cork VEC would be useful viewing. In one observed lesson, LCA students worked collaboratively in pairs to plan a holiday budget. This was the only example of co-operative learning observed but it was well structured and successfully created learning opportunities through problem solving. Good quality practice such as this should be spread throughout the school.

A considerable number of students with literacy difficulties have been identified in the school. In response, the English department subject plan places a significant emphasis on the development of basic literacy and language skills and, subsequently, literacy development is a focus of English lessons. Students with significant difficulties follow the JCSP and benefit from a variety of literacy interventions and initiatives, including the Reading Challenge and a paired reading scheme with senior students acting as reading partners. The progress of the JCSP students is
guided and monitored through the use of the JCSP statements. The Accelerated Reading programme is used effectively to motivate students and to develop their reading habits. The school library, which is now being re-developed, has a section of four-hundred-plus books that have been classified at differing reading levels according to the Accelerated Reading system. Access to these books as well as the programme itself is organised efficiently by the JCSP co-ordinator. All students are expected to read independently at home and some are also withdrawn briefly from homework/study class to read individually and orally to a teacher. The JCSP co-ordinator also uses the Accelerated Reading programme to assess students and to track their progress as they independently read texts matched to their individual reading ability and interest level.

The school is currently developing a whole-school policy on literacy. This policy should support the literacy targets in the school’s DEIS Action Plan in its promotion of literacy development in all mainstream classes. The school should be mindful that teachers may require support and training to proficiently engage in the good practices identified in the draft policy. Practice observed during some classroom visits indicates a need to develop staff capacity for direct and explicit instruction of word attack and reading comprehension strategies, as well as techniques to learn spellings.

Students have good access to information and communication technology (ICT) through the school’s three computer rooms, and all JCSP and LCA students complete modules to develop and improve their ICT skills. Teachers have been issued laptops and there are data projectors in most classrooms. Good practice in successfully using ICT to enhance teaching and learning was observed in a number of lessons.

ASSESSMENT

Incoming students are assessed using school-created mathematics, English and Irish tests along with a standardised reading test. The latter test and a number of the other tests used in the school are now dated, and the school is advised to review their continued use. The school also accesses the results of standardised tests administered by their feeder schools, and this is good practice.

There is no re-assessment data available at present to gauge student literacy and numeracy progress. However, the school plans to use the assessment requirements of the Accelerated Reading programme and to re-assess reading skills using a recently-acquired standardised test to monitor and track future literacy progress. A similar plan should be put in place to track progress in numeracy. The collated data will aid in establishing a baseline for future target setting and enable the measurement of outcomes. The results of verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests administered at the end of first and second year should prove useful in monitoring whether students are achieving to their potential.

It would be a timely exercise now for the school to consider its overall assessment policy in regard to the purposes of testing and how the results can be used to create a baseline for tracking progress over each student’s school career. This should facilitate measuring outcomes for relevant literacy and numeracy targets in the school’s DEIS Action Plan.

Student progress is monitored through class work and end-of-term tests, as well as by the administration of standardised tests of reading and spelling. Homework was seen to be set and corrected in many classrooms. A review of student work collated in folders, class-work copybooks and corrected mock examination papers showed good levels of positive and constructive marking that indicated to students how they can improve. Student academic progress
is effectively reported to parents though parent-teacher meetings, JCSP celebrations, class journals and home visits by the home-school-community liaison teacher. The school is rightly proud of its good rates of retention and examination success and the increase in the student uptake of ordinary and higher level certificate examinations.

The special educational needs co-ordinator assists eligible students and their parents in applying for reasonable accommodations in the state examinations. The school endeavours to provide the appropriate accommodations to these students in school examinations. The school provides supervised study for examination candidates for one week during the Easter holidays and ensures that English, Irish and Mathematics teachers are available.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s admissions policy and practices are open and welcoming to all students. The school pledges to admit students regardless of their religion, social class or educational needs.
- Both management and staff display a positive attitude towards supporting students with special educational needs. The staff is committed and professional and the students are well cared for.
- There is a pro-active system in place to support the transfer of students from their primary schools, which includes TY students acting as mentors.
- The school has appointed an assistant principal to co-ordinate the provision for students with special educational needs. Allocated resources are used appropriately to support students with additional needs.
- The school is engaged in a systematic and positive approach to planning and preparation with all teachers collaborating in the development of school-wide policies and their respective subject department plans.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning in observed lessons was good. In the best lessons, instruction is individualised and based on student needs.

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

- It is recommended that a document to support the special educational needs policy be created to outline the organisation of the provision and to provide details of the procedures and criteria for selection and discontinuation of support as well as how each student receives support. This document should also delineate the roles and responsibilities of all personnel involved.
- It is strongly recommended that the school review its current streaming practices and, in particular, consider the benefits of mixed-ability grouping, especially for junior cycle students in the upper band.
- It is recommended that management encourage and support one or more additional teachers to acquire a post-graduate special education qualification. The school should also seek further professional development opportunities for the whole-school staff and conduct an audit of staff needs to inform this action.
- It is recommended that the school engage with an individual planning process for the students identified as having special educational needs. This process should be based on individual needs and be carried out in consultation with students and their parents.
A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal, the deputy principal, and the co-ordinator of the provision at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.