

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**Saint David's Christian Brothers' School
Artane, Dublin 5
Roll number: 60471F**

Date of inspection: 03 March 2010



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following an inspection special educational needs (SEN) in St David's CBS. 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 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. 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; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St David's CBS is a voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST). For the current school year, St David's has been allocated seventy-three resource teaching hours by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to support nine students with low incidence needs and twenty-five students with high incidence needs. These students present with a range of difficulties including physical, sensory and speech and language disabilities as well as specific and general learning disabilities. The total school population of 453 students also includes students requiring learning support for their literacy and numeracy difficulties.

The principal of St David's believes strongly in full participation for all students through access to a broad, balanced and differentiated curriculum and that all teachers should be involved in teaching students with special educational needs (SEN). He affirms that his staff has a positive attitude towards the inclusion of all students in the classroom. According to the school's admissions policy, St David's supports the principle of inclusiveness, particularly with reference to the involvement of students with a disability or other special educational needs. This policy has been scheduled for review and a number of changes have been proposed. This action is recommended as it would allow the policy to better reflect the inclusive nature of the school and its respect for diversity which is evident in many of its practices.

Policy development has been an ongoing process in St David's over the last ten years. The current special educational needs policy provides useful information regarding the goals of SEN in the school, the aims of the provision and the rationale and organisation for the school-created special classes. The document also outlines the role of the SEN co-ordinator. It could be enhanced with similar detailed information on the roles of the learning support teacher, the resource teacher, the additional support teachers, and the special needs assistants (SNAs). The SEN policy is now due for review. This process should further develop the policy describing how the SEN team works with and supports mainstream subject teachers to enable inclusion, how student progress in

literacy, numeracy and other targeted areas is monitored and recorded, how discontinuation of learning support is determined, and how parents are involved and kept informed. The review should also consider references to SEN in other school documents to ensure a consistency in terminology and approach throughout the school. The publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (Department of Education and Science, 2007) is a useful reference. When completed the policy document should be submitted to the board of management for ratification.

Since 2006, the school has accommodated a designated special unit for six boys with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) staffed with the equivalent of 1.5 whole-time teaching posts and two fulltime SNAs. The ASD Unit co-ordinator who holds a post-graduate qualification in autism has worked with management to draft an admissions policy for the unit which provides applicants with useful information on the criteria for placement in the unit. An ASD Unit policy has also been developed. The latter document describes the accommodation, the provision and the staffing. It also provides information on two of the methodologies/strategies in use, the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-related Handicapped Children (TEACCH) programme and the Picture Exchange System (PECS). Commendably, it is the unit's policy to promote student participation in all whole-school activities such as Charity Days, the Christmas carol service and Bowling with Buddies. This policy document is due for revision to fully reflect current practice. Students enrolled in the unit spend varying amounts of time receiving support and tuition in the unit and participating in mainstream subject classes with their respective age-peers. The students with ASD who are in transition year are fully integrated with their mainstream peers for all subjects with the exception of English and Mathematics and all of the students have their lunch with the mainstream students. This is good inclusive practice. The students in the unit benefit from services funded by Beechpark Autism Services. The unit maintains regular contact with a number of external agencies.

St David's has a well-established procedure for gathering information on students which enables the early identification of those in need of support. Incoming students sit an assessment in the October prior to entry. The students' scores on a reasoning ability test are ranked to inform the creation of set classes. The parents of the group of students with the lowest test scores are invited in to meet the principal and the SEN co-ordinator to discuss the test results. Further information may be sought on some students and some may be re-tested, but the final result is the formation of a special class. The highest achievers are placed in one class with the remaining students placed in mixed-ability classes. This practice needs to be reviewed as research now available highlights the potentially negative effects of assigning students to fixed class groups based on measures of general ability. Furthermore, first year is too soon to make such decisions around student placement. It is therefore highly recommended that the school considers the introduction of mixed ability classes for all first year with the extended use of differentiated instruction and co-operative teaching methods to cope with the diverse needs of students. This would need to be coupled with the continued use of a minimum amount of withdrawal for the few students with exceptional needs. A further point to note is that the forming of classes on the results of a single test is not good practice. A single test result cannot determine whether or not a student can be best catered for in a mainstream class. In this regard, the school is reminded that a guidance inspection report in 2007 recommended a review of the continued use of this particular test as it lacks Irish norms and is outdated.

The school's HSCL co-ordinator has developed an excellent school transfer programme for students entering St David's. Ongoing activities throughout the school year prior to entry are organised and the HSCL co-ordinator works directly with the feeder schools to prepare and inform incoming students and their parents thus ensuring a smooth transition from primary to

post-primary. This programme is particularly concerned with addressing the probable anxieties of students presenting with special educational needs. Additionally, the plan for 2009-10, produced by the school's student support team which includes the learning support and resource teacher, summarises a number of objectives and activities which are to the benefit of students with SEN.

In the junior cycle, one of the mixed-ability classes follows the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) while the remaining classes do the traditional Junior Certificate. The single JCSP class in each junior cycle year focuses on literacy development while the other two mixed ability classes benefit from one literacy class each week. The size of the special class allows individual attention to both literacy and numeracy development. First year students in the special class remain together for English, Irish, Mathematics, Geography, History, Computers, Religious Education, Physical Education, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). In addition, they have a chance to sample a range of subjects (Business Studies, Science, French, Music, Art, Craft and Design, Metalwork, Technical Graphics and Materials Technology: Wood) of which they will eventually select three to study for the Junior Certificate. The special classes are timetabled concurrently with the two mixed ability classes for the practical subject options which facilitates positive social interaction between the students. In addition to the special classes, the school's range of provision includes a limited amount of individual and small group withdrawal, co-operative teaching and placement in the ASD Unit.

At senior cycle, there is an option for students to do a transition year programme or to start directly to study the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Support at senior cycle is provided through withdrawal, team teaching, reducing class size and, for some students, placement in the LCA class.

Overall provision for students with special educational needs is co-ordinated efficiently by a qualified learning support teacher who holds a post as an assistant principal. He is responsible for the managing and organising of learning support and resource teaching under the direction of the principal. The SEN co-ordinator, the subject teachers who are assigned resource hours, and the SNAs meet each term to review the school's overall provision and the progress of individual students. These meetings are minuted.

There are many additional examples of good collaboration in the school. The SEN co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor collaborate on testing throughout the year and the principal and the SEN co-ordinator liaise jointly with the school's assigned National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) psychologist and the NCSE special educational needs organiser (SENO). There is also significant interaction between the SEN co-ordinator and HSCL co-ordinator in St David's. Together they discuss the progress of individual students and work together to support the families of students with diverse learning needs. For example, they have organised a paired reading project to train and support the parents of students in the first and second year special classes to read with their children. In addition, the HSCL co-ordinator provides support through home visits and through arranged meetings between parents and the principal or the class tutor or year head. The HSCL co-ordinator also organises a number of personal development programmes within the school.

It is the board of management's stated policy to encourage and provide financial assistance for teachers to undertake continuing professional development. Whole-school in-service on special education-related topics has been presented by organisations such as the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and the Second-Level Support Service (SLSS) as well as by a number of

individual speakers. In addition, a number of teachers have availed of the board's support to attend relevant courses and conferences. Together this has increased the capacity of the staff to cope with the responsibility for inclusive teaching that is given to all of the teaching staff. Teachers are assigned to teach at all levels including the special classes. All teachers teach classes where students with special educational needs are included and a number also work in the ASD Unit. This is good practice. The SEN co-ordinator and a qualified resource teacher are available to provide advice and support to mainstream teachers.

Five SNAs have been allocated to students in St David's by the NCSE. Two of the SNAs are allocated to support the students enrolled in the ASD unit and three SNAs have been allocated to other students fully or partly in mainstream classes. The SNAs have a range of experience and appropriate training. The SNAs spoke positively about the school's provision and about their role. A good rapport exists with the teachers and the support they provide is welcomed. The SNAs keep daily diaries to record observations including notable incidents and evidence of student progress. This is good practice.

Two connected classroom are used to accommodate the ASD Unit while two other classrooms provide bases for learning support and resource teaching. Together the four rooms contain a good range of appropriate teaching materials. There are no separate budget allocations for the SEN department or the ASD Unit, but the co-ordinators and the teachers may make requests for purchases directly to the principal who has pledged to treat them favourably. The area of ICT is well developed throughout school. There is a functioning intranet within the school and an excellent school website. Many classrooms have interactive whiteboards, data projectors and *Smart Notebooks*. The school might now consider the use of the intranet system to disseminate SEN-related information such as student profiles, behaviour and support plans and specific methodologies and strategies to support learners with various needs.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

No planning documentation was made available to the inspector by teachers during the evaluation.

Profiles of students with additional needs are compiled using information provided by parents and feeder schools, the results of the entrance assessment and diagnostic testing and relevant excerpts of any psychological or other professional reports. According to the school, these are disseminated to teachers to inform planning. This is good practice. Teachers providing subject support through individual and small group withdrawal sessions plan in parallel with the subject teacher. Twenty copies of the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007) were stored in the staff resource room but it is not clear whether subject teachers reference these in their subject department plans or in their individual lesson planning.

The co-ordinator of the ASD Unit with the involvement of the parents and the SNAs develops individual education plans (IEPs) for each student in the unit. However, the rest of the school staff have not yet engaged with the individual planning process. It is recommended that the school re-considers its position in this regard. The full inclusion of students with low and high incidence special educational needs is dependant on the collaborative identification, prioritisation and consistent use of individualised learning and behaviour targets across the whole-school to guide planning and to monitor and evaluate progress. For the further benefit of students with

special educational needs, it is recommended that the school engages more fully in the individual education planning process.

The school can access support in planning for students with special educational needs by consulting the *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* (NCSE, 2006) and through contact with the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie).

The school participates in the School Support Programme of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and is in receipt of funding to address a range of school issues including the current levels of literacy and numeracy within a number of the school population. It is recommended that the school builds on the present practices by developing and documenting a whole-school strategy for the development of literacy and numeracy skills for all students. This strategy should focus first on collecting data on the current levels of attainment in these areas for the whole school population and on assessing the existing strategies in place to address them. The school should then identify what more needs to be done. The school should put in place measures to monitor and evaluate student progress and the success of the whole-school strategy as part of its action plan for DEIS.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

During the two days of the evaluation a total of eleven junior and senior cycle lessons were observed covering a range of subjects including Mathematics, English, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Materials Technology: Wood and Science. Overall, most of the observed lessons ranged from good to excellent. In the three lessons visited in the ASD Unit, appropriate and autism-friendly methodologies were in use and the communication, social, organisational and academic needs of the students were being met. Lessons were structured and well planned. There was a good use of eye contact and naming and visual information and verbal repetition to deal with distractions and to promote classroom management. Students were fully engaged in learning and intent on completing appropriate work to the best of their abilities.

The remaining eight lessons observed were a combination of small group and whole class, mainstream subject lessons. For many, direct instruction was the prominent teaching method, but many also facilitated students in discussions and question-and-answer sessions that promoted learning. Teachers used careful lesson pacing, repetition and reinforcement to good effect. The language in use by teachers was clear and consistent and students were helped to assimilate new subject-related vocabulary for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some of the better lessons were more active, relevant and hands on in their use of role play, visual images and graphic organisers, and everyday objects that students were encouraged to handle and interact with. One particularly successful mathematics class featured the use of an actual Honda motorcycle engine to introduce and illustrate a lesson on volume and capacity. In other successful lessons, students role-played or interacted in a structured way which served to develop a strong understanding of the learning topic. A few teachers successfully involved students in co-operative learning activities where students worked in pairs and then shared their learning with the larger group. All teachers were proactive in their efforts to provide individualised support. Students were engaged in learning and positive in their responses to the teachers. They were, for the most part, very well-behaved, mannerly and co-operative. Information and communications technology was used effectively in a number of the observed lessons including a mathematics lesson with students in the ASD Unit.

In most classrooms, teachers created structured and disciplined learning environments and some good management strategies were observed. Many teachers ended lessons by asking students, 'What did we learn?' This is good practice as it encourages students to reflect on their learning. Only one teacher began her lesson with a discussion of previous learning and only two teachers shared learning outcomes with students at the outset of lesson. These practices should be promoted amongst teachers. In the two lesson which featured team teaching, teachers worked efficiently in tandem alternating between leading and supporting the instruction while giving each other support at various points in the lesson. Team teaching is an ideal way of creating inclusive classrooms. The school is commended for facilitating it and it is now encouraged to extend its use where possible.

ASSESSMENT

In-school examinations are held twice a year, before Christmas and before the summer recess. Trial examinations are held at Easter for those due to sit the certificate exams. Full reports of the results of these examinations are posted to parents along with details of attendance, conduct and academic progress. Teachers are encouraged by the management to give regular short tests in order to monitor learning in the subject areas. Other forms of cited assessment include classroom activities, portfolios, projects, practical, and written and oral class work. Assessment information may be communicated to parents as part of the term reports or at parent-teacher meetings which take place formally once a year. Parents, especially the parents of students with special educational needs, are invited to contact the school at any stage to discuss progress or school-related issues. Student journals are used frequently for home-school communication and on a daily basis in the ASD Unit.

It is school policy that homework is set on a regular basis. A review of students' copies showed that this is the case and that these copies are suitably corrected. In some cases, teachers encouraged students with positive comments and in others, students are directly involved in the correction. Both of these practices are good.

A standardised group test of reading comprehension is administered to all first years early in the school year. The results of this test are used for various purposes including comparing reading levels within the year and between years, confirming class placement and, if applicable, to determine the necessity of intervention from a resource teacher.

Certificate examination students requiring reasonable accommodations are supported in their applications by the school. Contact is made with the assigned NEPS psychologist and standardised tests are used to support the application. The school endeavours to carefully match students assigned to alternative examination centres with an appropriate supervisor and to organise training and practice for students who are to be accommodated with a reader, a scribe or the use of technology.

The written information on assessment and students with special educational needs provided by the school only relates to the screening and baseline assessments that are carried on prior to and shortly after enrolment, and to the summative evaluation that takes place after instruction. As students with special educational needs often have difficulty showing their learning on such assessment instruments, it is important that schools have procedures to ensure formative assessment takes place. Formative assessment, which is assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning, takes place during instruction. It provides a check for the teacher, and the student, on progress in relation to what has been taught. It can locate errors so that alternative

instruction techniques can be prescribed. The school is advised to review their assessment policy with this in mind.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The principal believes strongly in full participation for all students through access to a broad, balanced and differentiated curriculum and that all teachers should be involved in teaching students with special educational needs (SEN).
- A number of SEN-related policies and statements provide useful information regarding the aims and organisation of the provision.
- St David's has a well-established procedure for gathering information on students which enables the early identification of those in need of support as well as an excellent school transfer programme.
- An assistant principal who is a qualified learning support teacher co-ordinates the provision for students with SEN with the support of a qualified resource teacher while a teacher qualified in autism co-ordinates the ASD Unit.
- It is the board's stated policy to encourage and provide financial assistance for teachers to engage in continuing professional development.
- There is evidence of collaboration through the work of the support team and between support staff and mainstream teachers which benefits students with SEN.
- Support is provided in both junior and senior cycles through a range of provision including withdrawal, small group teaching and team teaching as well as placement in the ASD Unit.
- Profiles of students with additional needs are compiled and disseminated to teachers to inform planning.
- Observed teaching ranged from good to excellent with a range of appropriate methodologies and strategies in use.
- Students were found to be engaged in learning and positive in their responses to the teachers. They were, for the most part, very well-behaved, mannerly and co-operative.

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 proposed review of the admissions policy takes place to allow the policy to better reflect the inclusive nature of the school and its respect for diversity which is evident in many of the school's existing practices.
- It is highly recommended that the school considers the introduction of mixed ability classes for all of first year with the extended use of differentiated instruction and co-operative teaching methods to cope with the diverse needs of students.
- For the further benefit of students with special educational needs, it is recommended that the school engages more fully in the individual education planning process.
- It is recommended that the school builds on its present practices by developing and documenting a whole-school strategy for the development of literacy and numeracy skills for all students.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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