

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs  
REPORT**

**St Fanahan's College  
Mitchelstown, County Cork  
Roll number: 71040M**

**Date of inspection: 27 January 2011**



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

**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 a subject inspection St Fanahan's College, Mitchelstown, County Cork. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of students with special educational needs 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 and examined students' work. 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, deputy principal and teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St Fanahan's College engages in a range of inclusive practices that are integral to overall school improvement. Effective and reflective practices, by both senior management and teachers, ensure that the quality of provision and whole school support available to students, including students with special educational needs, is of a good standard. The findings in this report are positive and the recommendations outlined are, in general, similar to the outcomes from the school's own self-review exercises.

The school is in receipt of significant additional resources for the support of students with low achievement and students with special educational needs. This provision includes a 1.0 whole time learning-support teacher allocation. Students with low-incidence and high-incidence special educational needs are currently allocated an additional 3.67 whole-time teacher equivalents and students requiring English language support are given an additional 0.45 whole-time teacher equivalent. There are four special needs assistants appointed to the school.

The principal and the assistant principal, whose post of responsibility is to co-ordinate provision and support, work closely and effectively together. The commitment and dedication of the co-ordinator, who holds recognised qualifications in special education, is acknowledged in this report as is the manner in which the co-ordinator has fostered a collective and student-centred response among colleagues. The promotion of a whole-school approach is supported by good timetabling practices which promote consistency of interaction between teachers and students across the school week and from year to year. A whole-school approach is also sustained by personnel involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan and

school planning working, closely with one another. This effective collaboration is a significant strength of the school.

Interventions to support learning are usually based on individual or small-group withdrawal. There are a considerable number of students with exemptions from Gaelge. These students are withdrawn from class at the time of the Gaelge lesson, as are those students not pursuing a modern language. Such supports are provided in two well-appointed resource rooms which have modern and suitable material resources, including information and communication technology (ICT). Some student work is on display in these and other classrooms, and students are rightly proud of their work and of their school.

The good rapport witnessed between teachers and students creates an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and promotes a sense of belonging. Photographic and other displays along the corridors, honouring individuals and events, add significantly to the positive learning environment. Students are encouraged to be involved in a wide range of activities and the school has also made efforts to promote positive behaviour by initiating a merit system which offers much potential. Peer-support has also been discussed by teachers and the use of paired-reading and paired-mathematics are deserving of attention in the next stages of planning.

The school successfully adopts and sustains a collaborative approach that is effective in meeting the needs of all its students. Provision and whole school support for those students identified with special educational needs is good and the appointment of an assistant principal to co-ordinate provision is indicative of the school's commitment to these students and their teachers.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school successfully meets the challenge of integrating a range of activities that are being undertaken by the school to support ongoing school improvement. A culture of collective inquiry and problem solving prevails among staff as they engage in planning and preparation activities among themselves, and where necessary with external agencies. There are very good lines of communication between those involved in co-ordinating special educational needs, school development planning, and aspects of DEIS; including initiatives associated with the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and the services of the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and the School Completion Programme.

Planning and preparation is approached systematically by the school, and while there are some areas that merit attention, the overall quality of planning and preparation is good. Engagement with prospective students and parents take place well in advance of students attending the school. Contact is made with the relevant primary schools and this work, combined with good relationships with personnel from external agencies, adds to the quality of planning and preparation. Individual files are constructed and all are made aware, in a timely manner, of the needs and strengths of students newly enrolled in the school. In planning and preparing for aspects specific to special educational needs it is recommended that the school devise a register of students which takes account of the needs presenting, the learning support and resource hours allocated, the manner in which they are used and the outcomes that emerge. The school has much of this work already in place and will find, particularly in light of the significant provision available, that the register will assist in maximising the additional allocation while also accounting for how it is implemented.

Baseline data on literacy have been compiled, interpreted and shared with staff. This good practice supports a whole-school approach to literacy. Plans to do similar work in the area of numeracy are underway and will further assist the school in making evidence-informed decisions, at the individual and whole-school level. The school's special educational needs policy is well constructed as is the school's staff booklet. These two documents offer opportunities for the school to outline collectively agreed understandings, of regularly used concepts such as, 'literacy', 'numeracy', and 'inclusion'. Detailed accounts, of aspects of teaching and learning could also be incorporated to include, 'framing questions', 'pair work and group work', and 'modes of feedback', such as formative assessment strategies. A review among teachers of existing and desired skills would also serve the school well in planning future professional development opportunities at whole-school, subject-department or individual-teacher level. Such a review should also take account of the development opportunities for the school's four special needs assistants, whose good work is acknowledged by all and by this report. More long-term planning will also require school management to support another staff member in accessing a recognised postgraduate course in the area of special education.

In planning for the future it is recommended that the school give consideration to how team-teaching, where two teachers share responsibility for teaching the same class at the same time, can assist in meeting the needs of students identified with special educational needs. To date the school has supported students by withdrawing them from certain classes, or by reducing the number of subjects being studied. Team-teaching extends the repertoire of responses a school can make and is very much in keeping with Department policy. The possible benefits include: meeting the needs of identified students in the collective setting of the classroom; meeting the needs of more students in the classroom setting; reducing the need for students to leave class or study fewer subjects; improving the quality of learning continuity for students and intra-school communication among staff. As outlined in the Department's *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post Primary Guidelines* (2007), team-teaching also offers professional development and learning opportunities for teachers in real time and in a real context; provides time for teachers to observe, monitor and support students' personal, social and academic development and allows teachers an opportunity to engage in, and learn more about, particular teaching practices. It may prove beneficial for the school to start the process of team-teaching with a small group of interested teachers, with a particular focus on a student or a number of students. The accruing benefits to students can be monitored and shared, as can the challenges and opportunities encountered by participating teachers. As discussed at the post-evaluation meeting, the use of team-teaching with the first-year mathematics cohort and the Leaving Certificate Applied classes may be a good place to start, as would arranging to visit a school similar to St Fanahan's which is engaged in team-teaching. Discussions with personnel from the School Completion Programme may also merit consideration in this regard.

Efforts to promote individualised educational plans have been undertaken in the past. The promotion of a 'one student one plan' approach was discussed in relation to students with low-incidence disabilities. The school should find it beneficial to adopt such a plan and the aforementioned school register will assist in tracking the additional allocation and its impact, both cognitive and affective, upon each student.

Through integrated and co-ordinated practices the school has a high standard of planning and preparation that operates through a range of interdependent initiatives. Planning and preparation for meeting the needs of students with special educational needs is good and is set in this supportive context. The existing co-operative and collaborative culture and the mindset of the school will assist in meeting the structurally-based recommendations outlined in this report.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

A total of seven lessons across junior and senior cycle were observed during the two-day inspection. Learning objectives ranged from the development of literacy and numeracy skills, to the acquisition and promotion of subject-based knowledge, skills and attitudes. Mainstream classes were visited as were classes formed on the basis of individual and small-group withdrawal. The subject areas covered in these lessons included Art, Gaeilge, English, Home Economics and Mathematics. The overall quality of learning and teaching observed was good.

All lessons were conducted in a purposeful manner. Relations between students and teachers were respectful, cordial and used by the teachers to create purposeful learning environments. A didactic approach was the norm in most lessons with teachers presenting information, asking questions of students and providing opportunities for students to practice, usually on an individual basis, that which was to be learned. Seating arrangements usually replicated the traditional layout. Some classrooms featured displays of individual student work, and as discussed with teachers such displays of students' work can be a powerful and authentic motivating factor for learning. In addition to wall displays, the use of ICT to publish students' work or place it on a secure network platform should also be considered. Cross-age peer support can also be achieved where older students can show their knowledge of subject matter by designing workbooks, posters and other learning artefacts that can be used by younger students. This practice can be particularly applicable to classes formed to support learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

The smaller classes more easily allow students to jointly produce work. Such work, once of an agreed standard can be shared with others in a manner similar to that described above. As an artefact, the joint product can be used by the teacher and students to illicit questions and promote comprehension. In time co-operative practices can combine with peer-assessment to further promote and motivate student learning. In one of the smaller classes there was good use made of differentiation by the teacher who personalised the learning by providing students with a range of different tasks, based on their learning needs. While differentiation may be more difficult to achieve in larger class groups, the school should examine how co-operative learning practices can facilitate teachers engaging with different students at different levels of learning.

In all cases teacher questioning was used effectively and in a variety of ways to monitor not only learning but also the pace of the lesson and the diverse needs presenting. Knowledge of both content and student were combined to advance learning and the learner's sense of belonging and achievement. In the larger classes, skills associated with framing and distributing questions were particularly important to ensure all students had an opportunity to participate. Here teachers sometimes asked lower-order questions by naming students in advance, safe in the knowledge that they would be reasonably expected to answer such questions. Judicious use of wait time was availed of in all cases and especially when higher-order questions were opened up to the class. Of note was the awareness among some teachers, of the need to tease out answers of a higher order where it was deemed the question had not been completely answered. Discussions with teachers centred on the use of 'no hands up' and 'think-pair-share' as strategies for raising the level of student accountability while also affording the teacher some time to engage with certain students. The practical dimension of some subjects saw teachers model, or request students to model, certain skills which in turn gave rise to questions and clarifications in advance of actions.

A common feature during the inspection was the desire among teachers to engage in conversations relating to teaching and learning. Good discussions took place regarding the

learning connections between the promotion of teamwork and that of literacy and numeracy skills. Some teachers also expressed an interest in the use of visual frameworks such as graphic organisers and how they might suit certain learning styles and the goals of certain syllabuses. The school is encouraged to examine how best to advance these and other aspects of teaching and learning.

The quality of learning and teaching in the lessons observed was good. Students with special educational needs have access to all subjects. Some teachers made very good accommodations and adaptations to ensure that students with more profound needs not only accessed the subject but also participated and benefited from being in attendance.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school has very good assessment procedures in place to monitor and share students' achievements and gains. The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices and recognises the interplay between assessment and teaching and learning. Daily classroom observation and interaction with students combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. As well as pre-certificate examinations, formal examinations take place at appropriate times throughout the school year. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track student progress.

Evidence-informed decision making is increasingly being advanced as part of the school's DEIS planning. Sharing comparative figures for literacy skills also supports efforts to maintain a whole-school approach and promotes a unity of purpose among the teachers. In advancing this good practice further, the school is planning pre-testing and post-testing of numeracy scores with similar dissemination and interpretation of data including the implications for teaching and learning. Teachers have made presentations to colleagues and it is suggested that such good practice should be extended to facilitate sharing of data, based on entire year groups or individual case studies. The latter combined with collective examination by a number of teachers of a particular student's work samples may be more appropriate for capturing progress that may not be so easily quantified. Sharing and interpreting assessment data collectively will promote collective responses among teachers and add to the quality of teacher discussions and actions in relation to students.

In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). Students are facilitated in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodations provided and are assisted in accessing these when they sit their pre-examinations. The participation and achievements of students with special educational needs in certificate examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. As well as acknowledging academic achievements the school seeks to promote students' social and emotional learning. Student self-esteem and sense of belonging is nurtured by recognising students' attainments and achievements. The OECD publication *Student Engagement At School* (2003) may assist further in this regard.

The school provides supervised study and a homework club for students. Some discussion centred on how the good work of the homework club might be enhanced if personnel had an opportunity to engage with staff in their classrooms. In the lessons observed both homework and classroom efforts were sensitively corrected with differentiated homework being assigned in a low-key and

effective manner. Ongoing development of individualised plans for students and the use of the staff handbook to share teaching methodologies and strategies should be linked to future development of assessment practices. The benefits to student learning that accrue from peer and self-assessment practices should also form part of future discussions regarding improvements to what are very good assessment practices in St Fanahan's College.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- St Fanahan's College engages in a range of inclusive practices that benefit all students.
- The school has a positive and purposeful learning environment.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed was good.
- Teachers work collaboratively with each other and others to ensure quality provision and support.
- Ongoing professional development for teachers is facilitated and encouraged by the school.
- A systematic and effective approach is adopted to many aspects of planning, preparation and assessment.

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 devise a student register where all additional allocation of hours can be tracked and subsequent outcomes recorded.
- Serious consideration should be given to other modes of delivering support for students such as team-teaching.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal, deputy principal and teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.