

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT**

**Saint Joseph's Christian Brothers' School
Fairview, Dublin, 3
Roll number: 60390F**

Date of inspection: 8 February 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | 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 of special educational needs (SEN) in St Joseph's CBS. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the provision and 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, the special education support team and resource teachers. 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 Joseph's Christian Brothers' School is a voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST). The students come mainly from St Joseph's Primary School, which is sited next to the secondary school, or from the local area. The school caters for all levels of ability and social backgrounds and partakes in the School Support Programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion. The school offers the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme and the Established Leaving Certificate. The current enrolment is 262 including three girls who are enrolled in a repeat Leaving Certificate class.

The school's board of management states its support for the underlying principles of inclusion in the school's enrolment and admissions policy. Commendably this policy welcomes students with special needs and pledges to use allocated resources to make reasonable accommodations and to include students with disabilities and special educational needs in all aspects of school life. The school has a range of procedures and practices in place that support this.

The school's home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator has established a laudable support programme to ensure the smooth transition of students from their primary school to their new secondary school. The programme offers an impressive range of activities to inform and support the incoming students and their parents. A special effort is made regarding the transfer of students with special educational needs. The school has established a clear process for the identification of those in need of support as part of the entry system. Feeder schools are requested to complete a transfer form for each pupil to give the school an indication of the pupil's interests, abilities and difficulties and to pass on the results of standardised testing conducted during sixth

class. Prospective first year students sit school tests in English, Irish and Mathematics and parents are asked to supply copies of previous medical or educational psychological reports.

All junior cycle students including students with special educational needs are placed in mixed ability class groupings. In some subjects, lessons are timetabled concurrently for all classes in the year group to allow sets comprising students of similar levels of ability to be formed. This is good practice. Students have full access to a broad and balanced curriculum. A small number of students are given a reduced timetable as a response to their specific individual needs. It is recommended that the introduction of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), as was recommended in the Whole-School Evaluation Report of 2007, be seriously considered for these students, as they are likely to benefit from the framework and supports that this programme has to offer.

If students are exempt from the study of Irish, they attend for learning support during Irish classes. If they are not, they are withdrawn from a subject determined through consultation between the school and their parents. Support in both junior and senior cycle is provided by a small core group of teachers on the basis of identified individual needs. Decisions regarding the amount and type of support and the delivery context are made by the support team. Provision includes individual or small-group withdrawal and placement in smaller classes or the designated unit for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). The provision is flexible, student-centred, and based on needs. Overall it is an appropriate use of the allocation. The resources allocated to the school by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) include 34.5 resource teaching hours to support students with a range of low and high incidence disabilities. Three of these students are assigned special needs assistants (SNAs). Thirteen students with Asperger's Syndrome are enrolled in the school's designated unit for students with ASD. These students are supported by an NCSE allocation of 3.5 resource teaching posts. The school would find it useful to create a register of all students in the school with special educational needs. A register can be used to clearly show how a student's allocation is being used to provide support by noting each student's support needs as well as when and by whom the support is provided. The school maintains good relations with and acknowledges the welcome support of a number of agencies including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the NCSE.

A teacher qualified in special education acts effectively as the co-ordinator of the provision. Her responsibilities include co-ordinating the work of the special needs team and ensuring the provision of special needs support for all students identified as having special educational needs. The co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor, the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator, three resource teachers and the SNAs work as a special education support team and they are scheduled for a weekly meeting which is used to monitor, review and evaluate the provision for each student. Any recommendations resulting from the review process are submitted to the management. The team collates and disseminates pertinent information on students with special educational needs, regularly reviews the existing provision and changing needs of the students, prepares the support timetables and plans the appropriate use of the allocated resources collaboratively.

The school has a draft special educational needs policy dated September 2009 which was prepared collaboratively by the co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor and the deputy-principal. It has a range of content including the aims and organisation of the provision along with relevant information on assessment, record-keeping, communication, exceptionally-able students and the work of the SNAs. This policy document underlines the school's intention to promote a whole-school approach for special educational needs and its primary objective of meeting individual needs. A focus of the provision is to encourage development of independent learning skills. The

school's draft special educational needs policy declares that mainstream teachers implement a policy of inclusion, providing effective learning opportunities that match the needs of all pupils. It states that differentiation is used, in order to best enable students of all abilities to access the curriculum. This is a positive practice. This policy was identified by the staff as being in need of development and it is recommended that management facilitates this process. The *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (Department of Education and Science, 2007) can provide useful guidance. Among the topics the review should consider including are the responsibilities and duties of the co-ordinator and the SNAs as well as how the special needs team can work collaboratively with the mainstream teachers to support the full inclusion of all students.

The SEN policy records the school's endeavours to meet the challenges of exceptionally able students through activities to develop the spectrum of intelligences, the provision of a suitable curricular programme, by employing appropriate educational strategies, and by fostering an ethos conducive to high achievement. This is an admirable venture. The school is advised to consider developing a policy document on the identification and support of gifted and talented students which would provide more detail about the work of the school in this area. The publication *Gifted and Talented Pupils: Guidelines for Teachers* (CCEA/NCCA, 2007) would be a useful reference for this action.

The board of management and staff of St Joseph's CBS are to be commended for their considerable efforts in including significant numbers of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) into the life of the school. Since the enrolment of the first students with Asperger's Syndrome who were transferring from the ASD Unit in St Joseph's Primary School, the school has gradually evolved a full system of support. It is the intent of the unit to mainstream the students as much as is possible while providing as much individualised support as required. According to the co-ordinator, all of the current students with ASD are intellectually capable of studying the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level courses but some have specific difficulties participating in mainstream classrooms due to challenging behaviour or limited social and communication skills. These students are catered for in individual or small-group teaching sessions. A flexible approach is taken which enables students to move in and out of mainstream to suit their changing needs. This is good practice. The support staff described teachers as being very accommodating regarding this approach. The unit is currently housed in adjoining classrooms but the school reported that it has applied to, and had discussions with, the Building and Planning Section of the Department regarding the development of a purpose-built ASD unit for the school.

The special educational needs co-ordinator who also co-ordinates the ASD Unit is experienced and knowledgeable in the area of autism. She has worked collaboratively with the guidance counsellor and the deputy-principal to draft an ASD Unit policy document. It contains a mission statement which focuses on individual needs and the promotion of a safe and caring learning environment as well as a range of information on matters such as parental involvement, the curriculum, inclusion, child protection procedures, staffing and professional development. The document also gives detailed information about the set criteria and procedures for the enrolment of students with Asperger's Syndrome in the unit. Many of the students in the unit receive ongoing support, as appropriate, from a psychiatrist, psychologist, speech-language therapist, occupational therapist and social worker through Beechpark Autism Services. However, the school regretted that these services were not available to all of the students with Asperger's Syndrome.

The co-ordinator has completed post-graduate qualifications in autism and another unit staff member is currently enrolled in a post-graduate course in special education. These and other staff members have also benefited from attendance at courses on a range of autism-friendly approaches such as TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children), ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), Social Stories and the Hanen Program. Professional development for all teaching staff has included a day's training from the Special Education Support Service on Asperger's Syndrome and another day on special educational needs. The school funds staff memberships of associations such as the Irish Association for Teachers of Special Education (IATSE) and Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland (ASPIRE) and funds attendance at relevant conferences. The school's website gives information on the role of the special needs department and provides links to the NCSE, ASPIRE, the National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE) and the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA). Together these professional development activities have helped to build the school's capacity to provide an appropriate education for students with special educational needs.

There were eight special needs assistants (SNAs) working in St Joseph's at the time of the evaluation. Five were allocated to the ASD Unit and three were assigned to support individual student needs. A recent review of the school's allocation by the NCSE resulted in no changes. All of the SNAs have attended for relevant training including inservice training from both the Special Education Support Service and Beechpark Autism Services. The SNAs are welcomed in the mainstream classrooms, maintain a good working rapport with teachers and are fully included in all school life. Two of the SNAs attend staff meetings as representatives. Weekly meetings are held between the special needs assistants (SNAs) and the special education support team. These meetings are used to share appropriate information about students and are minuted. Each SNA keeps a journal to record their observations of student progress and related issues and incidents. This is good practice. They play an important role in supporting the students' social and communication needs as well as managing any challenging behaviours effectively. The SNAs should be ever mindful of their role in promoting student independence.

Including the ASD Unit, there are a total of four designated support rooms in St Joseph's. They are well organised to provide individual and group work areas as well as to accommodate small classes. There is a range of resources available including a good selection of books and teaching materials and educational games and software. The walls displayed visual timetables, motivational prompts and behaviour reminders for students as well as examples of student work. There was evidence that the communication between the school and the students' homes was very good and that the school places a high value on the concept of home-school partnership. There are also good communication links between the special needs department and the mainstream teachers and management. The school's guidance counsellor facilitates a transfer programme for students with special educational needs to facilitate an appropriate post-school placement for leavers.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The subject department planning documentation that was available for inspection indicated a variation in the amount of attention paid to special educational needs during planning. The better department plans noted informal collaboration with, and ongoing support from, the special needs department and the SNAs and affirmed the use of differentiation through adapted instruction, setting tasks and modes of assessment. There was no evidence of reference to the *NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General learning Disabilities* by subject teachers to inform planning. The school is advised that this publication is a valuable planning resource for

teachers to consult and should be referenced in subject plans. Planning for resource teaching in specific subject areas was of good quality although the style varied between teachers. Typically, planning showed both short and long term objectives for the curriculum area or the skill area being targeted and noted teaching methodologies, activities and materials in use.

The school has not fully engaged with the individual education planning process on a whole-school level. However, extended student profiles have been prepared for all of the students attending for resource teaching including the students in the ASD Unit. The profiles contain information on individual students including psychological and other professional reports, the results of school testing and information on key skills targeted for development in areas such as oral language and communication, literacy, numeracy, and Social and Personal Health Education (SPHE). The profiles also contain notes of meetings in relation to the student and any individual education plans from previous schools. Information considered relevant is disseminated to the teaching staff. It is recommended that the school builds on this good practice by considering how it might further individualised planning. This might include creating a common school template which can be used to identify learning and behavioural objectives for individual students. These objectives should be based on each student's priority needs as identified by the staff, the students and their parents and targeted consistently in all classrooms. Further information on the individual planning process is available through the Special Education Support Service (SESS).

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eleven individual and small group lessons were observed in the course of the evaluation. The lessons were with both junior and senior cycle students covering a range of curriculum areas including English, Mathematics, History, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), and Social, Political and Health Education (SPHE). Most of the observed teaching in support classes was of good quality. Individual lessons focused on priority learning needs while group lessons were characterised by differentiated instruction. There was a good use of methodologies and strategies which were appropriate to the learners' needs including scaffolding, modelling and positive correction. A strong emphasis was placed on language development and the acquisition of subject-related vocabulary, and the development of thinking skills. Instruction was well paced and often informal but always structured with a disciplined learning environment being maintained. Teachers made excellent use of eye contact, repetition and naming to keep students' attention and to minimise distractions. Students were engaged in learning and were co-operative and responsive to the teachers who were positive and caring in their efforts to provide individualised support. Students were well-behaved and mannerly and expressed an appreciation of the teachers' support.

The Whole-School Evaluation Report of 2007 noted the use of team teaching in some classes and suggested that its use be extended as good practice. One team teaching lesson was observed during this evaluation. Two groups of students with Asperger's Syndrome were combined for an SPHE lesson on dealing with stress. The teachers had collaboratively planned and then delivered effectively an active learning lesson which successfully engaged the students. The teachers efficiently alternated between being the lead and the support. The school is advised to continue to develop the practice of team teaching in mainstream classes as an alternative to withdrawal in providing inclusive support for students with SEN in mainstream classes.

While a number of classrooms have computers, information and computer technology (ICT) did not feature in any of the observed lessons. There are three interactive whiteboards in the school. The one which is in a resource classroom was not functioning at the time of the evaluation.

ASSESSMENT

Although the results of the February assessment tests identify most incoming students who will require support teaching, students may also be referred directly to the special needs department by mainstream teachers who are concerned about their progress at any time during their time in St Joseph's. In response, the resource teachers administer a number of standardised and diagnostic tests to these students to inform decisions around the provision of support teaching. The school is reminded that the Department publishes a revised list of approved tests for learning support teachers (and guidance counsellors) annually on the website www.education.gov.ie.

The school employs a range of assessment modes to monitor student academic progress in the subject areas. Formal testing includes class and end of term tests in December and May as well as second term pre-examinations for state examination candidates. Each year the school encourages and supports a number of third and sixth year students in their applications for reasonable accommodations in the certificate exams. The special needs department provides these students with support and any training that is needed. Teachers also monitor student achievement through classroom participation, set tasks and homework. All of this is good practice.

As with the parents of the other students, the parents of students with SEN are kept informed of their children's achievement through the school's traditional formats of end of term reports and parent-teacher meetings. Of additional value to these parents is the use of the home-school journal as a daily form of communication and regular telephone contact to monitor progress.

Neither the school's draft special educational needs policy nor the draft ASD Unit policy provides information on how the progress of students with special educational needs is monitored and, more importantly, how assessment strategies impact on instruction. In light of this, it is recommended that the special needs team reviews the purposes and procedures involved in the current assessment practices in use for students with SEN and, in particular, to consider how information about the processes and outcomes of learning are gathered, interpreted and used. This review should culminate in detailed sections on assessment being added to the aforementioned policies.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school's board of management states its support for the underlying principles of inclusion in the school's enrolment and admissions policy.
- The school's home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator has established a laudable support programme to ensure the smooth transition of students from their primary school to their new secondary school.
- The provision for students with SEN is student-centred, based on needs, flexible, and an appropriate use of the allocation.
- The co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor, the HSCL co-ordinator, three resource teachers and the SNAs work as a special education team and they are scheduled for a weekly meeting which is used to monitor, review and evaluate the provision for each student.

- The board of management and staff of St Joseph's CBS are to be commended for their considerable efforts in including significant numbers of students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) into the life of the school.
- The school has draft policies for the provision of students with Special Educational Needs and Asperger's Syndrome which were prepared collaboratively by the co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor and the deputy-principal.
- The whole-school staff and, in particular, the resource teachers have availed of a range of relevant professional development opportunities with the support of the management.
- Most of the observed teaching in support classes was of good quality.
- Students were engaged in learning and were co-operative and responsive to the teachers who were positive and caring in their efforts to provide individualised support.

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 introduction of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), as was recommended in the Whole-School Evaluation Report of 2007, be seriously considered for those students who would benefit from the framework and supports that the JCSP has to offer.
- It is recommended that management facilitates a process for the review and development of both the draft special educational needs policy and the draft ASD Unit Policy.
- It is recommended that the school builds on existing good practice by considering how it might further individualised planning.
- It is recommended that the special needs team reviews the purposes and procedures involved in the current assessment practices in use for students with SEN and, in particular, that it considers how information about the processes and outcomes of learning are gathered, interpreted and used.

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