

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs  
REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School Convent of Mercy  
Mallow, County Cork  
Roll number: 62350D**

**Date of inspection: 22-23 September 2009**



**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 in St. Mary's Secondary School, Mallow, Co. Cork. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs (SEN) 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, 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.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St. Mary's Secondary School has a long tradition of making provision for students with special educational needs and has an open enrolment policy. The promotion of inclusive practices is the norm in this school and a range of high-quality provision and whole-school support was witnessed during the course of the two-day inspection. The leadership shown by senior management is a significant determining factor in ensuring students have access to, participate in, and benefit from school life.

The student population includes students identified with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities, as well as students with low achievement in aspects of literacy and numeracy. The total allocation for learning support is 22 hours, and low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities are allocated 44.5 and 7.5 hours respectively. The designated special class, established in 1981, is allocated 1.4 whole-time teacher equivalents which provides 30.8 teaching hours. The provision for special educational needs is used for the purposes intended and an exemplary tracking system is in place to ensure that optimal use is made of the resources provided. A total of 64 hours of special needs assistant support is also allocated to the school and their good work is in keeping with Department guidelines.

Three teachers hold formal qualifications in the area of special educational needs and another member of staff is currently engaged in training. Other teachers have also taken upon themselves to individually engage in relevant professional development. Such commitment is acknowledged in this report and reflected in the quality of provision witnessed in many of the classrooms visited. The co-ordination of the designated special class is undertaken by a qualified teacher while a team approach, under the guidance of the principal, is adopted throughout the rest of the school. Timetabling of the additional hours provided is done in tandem with the construction of the main timetable, resulting in the school being able to provide a consistent, cohesive and structured sequence of lessons across the school week and from year to year. Such practice is highly

commended and, as noted by teachers and students, also highly effective. It avoids a fragmented approach to one-to-one and small-group withdrawal and facilitates planning for more recently adopted delivery models such as team-teaching. Furthermore the creation of a core, but not exclusive, team of teachers working with identified students is facilitated, where relevant professional learning can be planned and accessed as deemed appropriate.

The school is appropriately flexible in the manner in which it responds to individual student needs. Apart from the designated class, first-year classes are formed on the basis of mixed-ability groupings with access to all subjects in first year. Interventions to support students usually focus on specific language and mathematical needs, while a suitable balance is struck between individual prioritised learning needs and access to the broader curriculum. Students wishing to avail of additional support usually take one, instead of two, modern languages. Students with exemptions from Irish are also supported in their learning with additional classes being timetabled at this time. Any reduction in curricular provision is made only following consultation with home. The school is mindful of the need to ensure that such decisions do not foreclose on students' future career choices. The school provides an extensive range of supports for learning, ranging from provision in the form of the designated special class to individual and small-group withdrawal. Other forms of support such as team-teaching, where two or more teachers work in the same classroom, are increasingly being adopted. The quality and extent of the provision reveals the school's understanding of the ongoing interplay between inclusion, school self-evaluation and school improvement. In this regard, the leadership and collaboration shown by senior management and the special educational needs support team is deserving of praise.

The designated special class concentrates on consolidation of key life skills and students also have access to a number of subjects via mainstream teachers such as Art, Home Economics, Music and Physical Education. A small minority of the twelve students enrolled access mainstream classes for certain subjects. All students are encouraged to participate in aspects of school life including extracurricular and co-curricular activities. As captured by the images on corridors and classroom walls, the school actively seeks to create a sense of belonging among all its students wherever possible. This effort to promote a sense of belonging among all in the school is also witnessed in the school's good work at mentoring and supporting newly appointed and PGDE student teachers. The fostering of an inclusive atmosphere among adults through this and other practices can impact positively on efforts to foster inclusive practices in classrooms.

The school is well resourced with well-equipped designated rooms for the special class and for learning support. In addition, a sound-field system is in place in another classroom to address the needs of certain students with hearing impairments. Optimal use of this equipment is a high priority when timetabling decisions are made. A budget is in place for purchasing resources and a staff library is being extended to include relevant information regarding special educational needs.

Provision and support for students with special educational needs is of a high standard in St. Mary's.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The overall quality of planning and preparation is good but there are some areas that require attention. A systematic and well co-ordinated approach to the enrolment of first-year students is adopted by the school. Following the offer of places, the school arranges assessments in English, Gaelge and Mathematics. This baseline data is then discussed by school personnel who engage

with primary schools to further determine such abilities. Parents are subsequently invited to meet privately with senior management and a further general information evening is also arranged. The sequence of events above is in keeping with inclusive practices where assessment follows enrolment. The school's admissions policy draws on the relevant legislative developments and in this regard it makes considered and specific reference to students with special educational needs. Relevant external agencies are also contacted and the school works closely with the Special Educational Needs Officer as well as representatives from the Visiting Teachers Service and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). In planning for 2009/2010 the school has prioritised, among a number of items, the promotion of team building among staff, including team-teaching, and whole-school in-service in the area of special education.

A well crafted special educational needs policy was ratified by the board in 2007 and clearly states the rationale for such a policy, as well as outlining the aims of the special educational needs department, the provision for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations, the physical environment, partnership with parents, an interpretation of the principle of inclusion, teachers' and special needs assistants' roles as well as identifying issues pertaining to timetabling, resources and professional development. As witnessed, the school clearly believes in, and strives to achieve, a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all its students in both its policy and in its practice.

Notwithstanding the good work being undertaken, it is recommended that the school formally appoint a co-ordinator for special educational needs. Such a co-ordinator would preferably have completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (PGDSEN). It would be important that this appointment would be seen to further promote rather than replace the existing spirit of co-operation among teachers and that it would continue to support the central role that the mainstream subject teachers play in allowing students to access, participate in, and benefit from the learning experiences provided by the school. A guide to the role and responsibilities of the co-ordinator are available in the Department of Education and Science *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines* (2007). A formal regular meeting time for the core team of teachers involved should also be considered. As required, other teachers and members of the special needs assistant staff could also be present at such meetings.

Subject department planning addresses the range of subject-specific implications for students with special educational needs. Keywords and word banks have been developed and subject teachers work closely with the teachers appointed to give additional support. The aforementioned timetabling practice facilitates communication between the relevant teachers and supports cohesive and effective responses to individual and collective student needs. Individual teachers plan and prepare well for their interaction with students and some work has been done on individual educational plans. The practice of facilitating student involvement in some of these plans was most effective and promotes student self-advocacy in a very positive way. The log book used by some students was also seen to be effective in supporting pre-teaching and post-teaching of certain vocabulary and concepts.

In the designated special class, some work has also been carried out on individual planning for students, not only during their time in school, but also for their placements thereafter. Long-established and deserving of much praise, the special class acts as both a resource centre for students and also as a way of further integrating students with their peers in mainstream. Such good work serves to facilitate greater access for the special class as a group to mainstream teachers but also to mainstream classes as individuals. A further extension and continual review of learning opportunities in mainstream classes, for individuals and small groups of students, is encouraged as are reverse integration practices, for example lunchtime activities or cross-age

paired reading. The emerging benefits of team-teaching and cross-curricular approaches, as between Art and English, are very encouraging and may also offer further opportunities to support individual students in accessing and benefiting from mainstream classes. However, future planning for the special class will have to address the shortfall in instructional contact time for their students, which is not in keeping with the requisite 28 hours of instruction.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In total, ten lessons involving nine different teachers were inspected and these lessons were of forty minutes' duration. These lessons ranged from subject-specific lessons such as History, Home-Economics, and an LCA module, to supporting study skills, literacy and numeracy among small groups and individuals. Some students in receipt of resource hours were also visited, where needs specific to individuals were being addressed. Teachers' knowledge of subject matter and of individual learners ensured that the overall quality of teaching and learning was very good in the lessons observed. Good lines of communication between teachers assisted in supporting learning in a cohesive and co-ordinated fashion, with individual teacher's plans linking with subject plans and with the identified needs of students.

All lessons were well structured and well paced with appropriate differentiation, by content, process and product, a regular feature of many lessons. The purposeful learning environment was also enhanced by the mutual respect shown by teachers and students to one another. Lessons made effective use of ICT, images, handouts, powerpoint presentations, and other suitable resources. In most cases, lesson outcomes were outlined at the beginning of the lesson and teachers drew upon students' interests and experiences to initiate lessons and to sustain the learning experience. Many lessons made good use of group work and paired work to consolidate learning or to provide opportunities for co-operative and active learning. Students visibly enjoyed working with each other and profited from the feedback sessions to the rest of the class. Such practices ensured that all students participated in the lessons and allowed teachers to circulate and work with individuals or small groups at a more differentiated level.

Students showed admirable confidence and a common feature in all lessons was the open dialogue that occurred between students and teachers. As well as answering questions, students were comfortable in asking questions or seeking clarification from their teacher. The student voice was particularly noticeable in the lessons involving small group or individual withdrawal. In keeping with their involvement in formulating their own individual educational plans, students were further encouraged in these lessons to indicate their perceived learning requirements. Teachers used a variety of questioning techniques such as open-ended and closed questions, as well as low-order and high-order questions. Once again, teachers' knowledge of students ensured that direct and global questioning promoted learning and focused on helping students reveal their learning and in the process boost their self-esteem. Appropriate time was given to students to respond to questions and, where difficulties occurred, other students were respectfully requested to assist. Regular and appropriate praise for students' contribution and effort was also used to good effect by teachers as was the judicious use of humour. Indeed, in all lessons visited, a sense of fun and wonder were cultivated by teachers who sought to actively engage students in a purposeful learning environment that used student curiosity and energy to bridge the gap between prior and desired learning.

Lessons that were observed in the designated special class focused mainly on developing students' skills in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The mixed abilities within this group were effectively addressed by the teacher who subtly posed different tasks for different students. The

cross-curricular approach involving the promotion of literacy between the art class and English class proved very effective and the practice of team-teaching in these lessons further added to the alignment and achievement of desired learning outcomes.

Other lessons associated with the promotion of literacy and numeracy often combined these two areas of learning within the 40-minute lesson. A lesson on 'timetables' made very good use of the overlap between literacy and numeracy and students were encouraged to work individually initially and, "If you're stuck you can work in pairs". The weaving of literacy and numeracy skills was also witnessed in a home economics lesson. Students were well versed in the required subject skills and combined these skills with knowledge of concepts in reading recipes, measuring weight and calculating time. The final product in this lesson was a great source of satisfaction to all involved. The discreet support given by the special needs assistants in this lesson also added to the learning experience. Another class combined similar skills and good use was made of paired work to consolidate learning. In this lesson the teacher skilfully combined private and public assessment of learning to determine if students were ready to advance to the next stage in their learning.

The LCA lesson focused on the topic of the elderly and was team-taught. The teachers' openness with each other was used to good effect in facilitating student interaction with the lesson. Here students and teachers were clearly comfortable speaking openly with each other and, while the internet, handouts and images guided the lesson, a noticeable feature was the willingness of students to speak of their personal experiences in relation to engaging with elderly people. Such willingness was in no small way due to the teachers' willingness to give insights into their own lives which gave students the confidence to do likewise. When asked how they viewed team-teaching, students responded that "two heads were better than one and if one teacher doesn't understand your point the other teacher can". Teachers similarly commented that the lessons were enriched by the presence of another colleague.

Students with significant sensory impairments were present in two separate lessons. Good use was made of the student's subject log in a one-to-one lesson where pre-teaching and post-teaching was very effectively facilitated. A high quality individual plan was used to guide progress and the student was appreciative of the assistance received by the teacher. In a mainstream lesson conducted with a sound-field system in place, the focus of the lesson was the work of the archaeologist. In this class of thirty students, the high-quality teaching and learning observed took full advantage of the facilities to meet the needs of identified students. All students benefited from the amplification of the teacher's voice and from the teacher repeating students' responses. When the microphone was used by the students it was done so effectively and once again, in keeping with the concept of universal design, all benefited from the fact that they were able to clearly hear their peers' contributions and were obliged to listen to whoever was in possession of the microphone.

In other lessons, study skills were addressed by focusing on the use of the dictionary and by examining how best to comprehend and summarise passages. The motive for acquiring such skills was clear to the students who worked collectively or individually and once again student-teacher rapport ensured that learning occurred. In these lessons, students were also assisted with subject-specific aspects of learning in English, Science, Geography and History.

The positive effects of previous engagement by staff with professional learning in areas of co-operative learning and assessment for learning was witnessed in many lessons. It is suggested that the school's aforementioned staff handbook would be a useful conduit to outline teachers' use of co-operative learning strategies as well as the use of questioning to assess learning and inform

teaching. A teaching and learning dimension to the staff handbook could include teachers' commentary on what pedagogical practices best promote learning in their subject areas and for whom. In a similar manner, the early outcomes of the team-teaching initiative being undertaken could be shared with colleagues.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices. Daily classroom observation and interaction with students combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. Good practice prevailed in monitoring the progress made by students with low achievement in the area of literacy and numeracy. It was common practice to cease providing learning support when deemed appropriate by teachers, parents and students. Students' progress, attainment and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis. Parents are facilitated, on request, to meet with teachers. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and Christmas and summer results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track students' progress. Standardised and diagnostic tests have begun to be introduced in first year and this practice should be extended to determine levels of student achievement, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. These assessments can in turn be used to retest students at a later date so that progress can be tracked and evaluated appropriately. Such practice will support a whole-school approach to improving learning outcomes, particularly if the outcomes are suitably shared and discussed with colleagues. Highlighting an individual student's degree of engagement and achievement may also serve a similar purpose. The school is commended for its questionnaire of first-year students regarding how well they have settled into the school. The OECD publication *Student Engagement At School* (2003) may assist with this very good initiative.

The participation and achievements of students with special educational needs in state examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. The bar of expectation is set realistically high, as indicated by a review of recent state examination results and the levels taken. The school is also mindful of students who are identified as exceptionally gifted and talented. In consultation with the local NEPS psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE). In general, students are facilitated in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodations provided and are assisted in accessing these when they sit their pre-examinations.

Staff who are involved in the designated special class are keenly aware of the need to provide appropriate and sequenced national accreditation opportunities for its students. FETAC level programmes are not engaged with unless deemed absolutely necessary and only following clarification of future accreditation opportunities in post-school settings. The school is not currently in a position to avail of the Junior Certificate School Programme. The school recognises that access to this programme will help meet the learning and accreditation needs of many students. The school is encouraged to continue to seek recognition to present this programme.

A homework club also assists students with their learning. Students' work, including copies and journals, was maintained to a high standard. Students' written work was found to be regularly corrected, on occasions signed and dated with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning. As witnessed, the good practice of team-teaching would appear to particularly facilitate immediate assessment, feedback and guidance to students. Such classes allow multiple opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students. Future policy development in the area of differentiating homework and assessment are encouraged and such developments will be

further informed by the planned attendance at seminar days on individualised planning organised by the Special Education Support Service (SESS).

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision and support for students with special educational needs is of a high standard in St. Mary's.
- The promotion of inclusive practices is the norm in this school and a range of high-quality provision and whole-school support was witnessed during the course of the two-day inspection.
- Timetabling of the additional hours provided is done in tandem with the construction of the main timetable, resulting in the school being able to provide modes of support that are consistent, cohesive and structured.
- The overall quality of planning and preparation is good but there are some areas that require attention.
- A systematic and well co-ordinated approach to the enrolment of first-year students is adopted by the school.
- The school's recent engagement with team-teaching reflects well upon those involved and indicates the school's willingness to be responsive to the needs presenting.
- Teachers' knowledge of subject matter and of individual learners ensured that the overall quality of teaching and learning was very good in the lessons observed.
- All lessons were well structured and well paced with appropriate differentiation a regular feature of many lessons
- Students showed admirable confidence and a common feature in all lessons was the open dialogue that occurred between students and teachers.
- The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices.

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 formally appoint a co-ordinator for special educational needs. Such a co-ordinator would preferably have completed the PGDSEN.
- Future planning for the special class will have to consider how best to integrate students into the mainstream setting and will have to address the shortfall in instructional contact time which is not in keeping with the requisite 28 hours of instruction.
- The use of standardised and diagnostic tests should be extended to determine levels, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. These assessments can in turn be used to retest students at a later date where progress can be tracked and shared appropriately.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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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