Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Saint Mary’s Secondary School,
Convent of Mercy, Charleville, County Cork
Roll number: 62450H

Date of inspection: 21-22 October 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Mary’s Secondary School, Charleville, 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision and whole-school support for students identified with special educational needs is of a very high standard in St Mary’s. Clear understanding by senior management of the underlying principles of inclusion combine effectively with the school’s core team of dedicated and committed teachers who each have accessed post-graduate training in this area of education. The positive findings in this report are considerable and the recommendations outlined are minimal and well within the remit of the school.

The school’s allocation of 59 additional teaching hours for provision for special educational needs is used appropriately and effectively. Among the needs identified are students with low-incidence and high-incidence disabilities, as well as students requiring support with learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The core team of three teachers, who are well qualified in special educational needs, work closely with colleagues to deliver support for learning in a variety of ways. 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. This support is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner and includes individual student withdrawal, small-group withdrawal and team-teaching, where two teachers work together with students in one classroom. The school is also mindful of the potential special educational needs of students with English as an additional language.

Classes are of mixed ability in first year with students having access to the full curriculum. Second and third year classes are also of mixed ability except for Gaeilge and Mathematics. As part of its inclusive policy, all students study Irish and this is indicative of the school’s positive philosophy regarding students’ learning capacity. Such practice encourages students, particularly those who may not in the past have had the opportunity to recognise their abilities, not only in the language, but also in themselves as learners. All involved are deserving of much praise. Where
students are withdrawn from class, decisions are only made following consultation with students, their parents and their teachers. Such withdrawal usually occurs at the beginning of second year when students decide to no longer pursue the study of a modern language. Every effort is made to ensure that such decisions are made in the best interest of the student and that they do not diminish a student’s perception of themselves as learners, or diminish future career choices. At the time of the inspection the numbers no longer pursuing a modern language after first year were quite small.

The quality of the provision is also reflected in the school’s responsible “wait and see” approach to accessing special needs assistants. At the time of the inspection the school, as part of its whole-school response, had not employed a special needs assistant and this was due to the school’s understanding of the key roles of the mainstream teacher and fellow students in promoting the independence of students wherever possible. Good working relations between the school and external agencies also ensure that, should the need arise, a special needs assistant may be employed immediately. The inclusive culture of the school is also reflected in the mentoring programme initiated for new staff members and the ‘buddy’ system among students. Such practices are designed to promote among all who are new to the school a sense of belonging and a sense of being valued.

The school is also mindful that learning is a social activity, both within and outside the classroom. In conversation with the students, it is clear that the wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities on offer are appreciated by the students and that such activities are open to all and foster a sense of belonging among the student population. The wide range of photographs and artistic displays on the corridors, as well as the general atmosphere throughout the school, also assists in this regard. There are good material resources available in the school, including a designated support room which houses relevant and suitable materials for learning and includes three computers that are internet connected. This classroom, as with many visited, displays students’ own work and in so doing provides students with an additional motivation to present their best. As discussed, the well-constructed school website may also offer similar opportunities for students to present their work.

There is very good provision and support for students with special educational needs in St Mary’s. Allocated resources are used appropriately and wisely, and in a manner that supports learning and teaching.

**Planning and Preparation**

Informal and formal lines of communication ensure that the overall quality of collective planning and preparation in the school is very good, with admirable leadership being shown by senior management, co-ordinators and teachers alike. In order to support the inclusion of all students, an effective and systematic approach is adopted by the school. The core team members and co-ordinator are deserving of much praise for the quality of planning and preparation undertaken. Early and ongoing communication with primary schools and with parents facilitates good collaborative planning and preparation in advance of students’ entry.

All available additional teaching hours are factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction and this supports the school’s efforts to provide a cohesive and structured approach in meeting identified needs. As well as enabling teachers to work consistently with students, this practice also facilitates team-teaching arrangements and allows the deployment of staff in a purposeful and focused manner, with teachers’ qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests
aligning with students’ identified special educational needs. Weekly meetings are also timetabled and this in turn allows the core team members to coordinate provision and remain flexible to necessary changes throughout the academic year. This meeting time also helps to sustain lines of communication with colleagues and with relevant personnel from external agencies.

The school’s policy document on special needs is well constructed and focuses on many of the practical aspects associated with providing students with a “broad, balanced and relevant curriculum”. During the course of the inspection it was clear that the contents of the policy were given expression on a daily basis. The key role of the classroom subject teacher is recognised in the policy while the roles and responsibilities of other staff members are clearly stated. The voice of students and parents is also well referenced with a detailed account being given of the process of identifying students’ needs and supporting such needs. Data protection and other procedural issues are outlined, including liaison with the board of management through the school principal. The policy document promotes the view that inclusive practices attend to needs among all members of the school community where the promotion of inclusive practices is closely aligned with school improvement.

As discussed with senior management, the contents of the special needs policy could usefully inform the school’s staff handbook, where roles and responsibilities as well as procedures and goals can be shared. The Department of Education and Science Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines (2007) may assist in this regard. Detailed reference to the teaching and learning practices engaged in by teachers would also serve both publications well, as would clear agreed understandings on such concepts as inclusion, whole-school approach, literacy and numeracy. A perusal of school subject plans commendably reveals a range of references to planning for students with identified needs. Once again a staff handbook could provide all staff members with both generic and subject-specific issues gleaned from and supportive of specific subject department plans. The school has a register of students in receipt of support and agreed procedures on how best to track interventions and monitor students’ progress, through the use of ICT facilities, could also be communicated and updated by the school handbook. With some additional information, this register will serve to inform and guide all members of staff in their engagements with individual students. Additional information could include an outline of students’ learning styles and strengths, the progress made, and when further progress will be reviewed and by whom. Furthermore such a register would assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, such as team-teaching, upon the overall additional hours allocated.

The school’s own evaluation of the need to provide ongoing professional development for mainstream teachers may, in part, be met by continuing to contact external individuals and supports such as the Special Education Support Service website (www.sess.ie). However, in planning for improvement, it is suggested that the quality of training and good practice that already exists among the support team should also be accessed. It would be worthwhile to provide staff members with ongoing opportunities to share their own good practice with their colleagues. Professional discussions could be based on evaluating and advancing the range of models associated with the delivery of team-teaching. Similarly, discussions could focus on examining collective planning for individual student’s needs or a review of successful teaching methodologies. Such reciprocal sharing of professional knowledge would have the added advantage of being context-sensitive and readily accessible thereafter.

Individual teacher planning and preparation, as witnessed during the inspection, was uniformly of a high quality and impacted very positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons visited was, in all cases, of a high standard. A total of ten lessons involving nine teachers were visited over the course of the two-day inspection. These lessons spanned a wide subject range across junior and senior cycle programmes which included, English, Mathematics, Geography, Business Studies, Gaeilge, and Science. Classes were formed on the basis of whole-class groups, team-teaching, small-group and individual withdrawal. Teachers were very well prepared for their lessons and students were engaged in their learning. Overall students’ achievement was in keeping with their ability, with an appropriate balance maintained between the amount of time spent on priority needs and the time spent accessing the wider curriculum.

Lessons were well paced with clear learning purposes and students visibly had a good rapport with their teachers. A significant feature of teacher-student relationships was the level of trust displayed by students which resulted in learning opportunities being taken wherever possible and in range of ways which suited students’ individual learning styles. Students are clearly benefiting from their time in St Mary’s, are happy in their learning, and many exude a commendable level of confidence in themselves and pride in their work and in their school. Student self-advocacy was supported and encouraged by teachers and this in turn promoted students’ motivation to learn and persistence with learning. Students were comfortable asking questions of teachers and as noted by students in a team-teaching arrangement, such questions could be posed either publicly or privately as suited the student best.

In turn, teachers’ framing of questions was used to very good effect with good use of lower-order and higher-order questioning. Knowledge of their students and of the subject matter informed teachers in choosing to ask directed or global questions. In all cases students were encouraged to put up their hands to answer global questions and sufficient wait time was given for students to compose their thoughts before replying. Opportunities for students to give joint, as well as individual, responses were also witnessed in some classes and an extension of these practices to include joint accountability would add to the high quality and purposeful learning environments that exist in St Mary’s. Such an environment allowed individual and curricular needs to be addressed in a manner that appropriately challenged each learner within the framework of syllabus and programme requirements. Humour, praise and laughter were evident in all lessons and students appeared to sense that the college was a place where they belonged and where it was safe to be themselves.

Differentiation by content and process was used to good effect in the lessons visited. New content was introduced using a variety of resources, some of which were teacher-generated or made by students, and all of which engaged students’ attention and where necessary clarified abstract concepts with practical items. Teachers also took advantage of pairing and grouping students to promote co-operative learning. When asked, students highlighted that such practices allowed them to learn from one another and to consolidate their existing knowledge. Teachers availed of such co-operative practices and their own purposeful seating arrangements to work with individuals and small groups, thus differentiating the learning by both content and process.

While team-teaching may provide a window into how colleagues teach and students learn, the aforementioned staff handbook may also assist with sharing instructional practices used by teachers. It may be helpful, for example, to devote a section of the handbook to teaching and learning where an outline on how teachers engage in framing questions or promote co-operative learning may form the basis for discussion and for sharing of the good practices witnessed.
**ASSESSMENT**

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 midterm, Christmas and summer. Class-based examinations are administered on a regular basis and results are appropriately monitored, stored and used to track students’ progress.

Interventions by members of the special educational needs core team are informed by teachers’ observations, and students in first year, while closely monitored to determine needs, are also given every opportunity to succeed independent of any intervention. Students’ progress and achievement are communicated to home on a regular basis and parents are encouraged and facilitated to meet with teachers. A bi-annual review is undertaken among all teachers of students in receipt of additional support and such good practice also supports the key role of the mainstream teacher in supporting students’ learning and development. Subject teachers’ input into discussions concerning individual students inform decision-making, including whether a student requires continued support or otherwise.

Standardised and diagnostic tests are used and interpreted appropriately. Some retesting is already in place to determine progress in literacy and numeracy skills. In order to further promote and sustain a collaborative and whole-school response, it is recommended that the findings from retesting, along with other student gains, should be appropriately shared with colleagues. Such findings could in turn feed into the aforementioned student register and individualised plans. Members of the special educational needs team have presented to colleagues and it is suggested that such good practice should be extended to facilitate sharing of assessment information, based on entire year groups or individual case studies, as well as sharing the diversity of teaching and learning practices that are informed by assessment outcomes. Those involved in team-teaching are also encouraged to share their story, including the frequency and quality of feedback to students, which such a delivery model facilitates.

In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the college 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. The participation and achievements of students with special educational needs in state examinations are rightly a source of pride for all concerned. As well as academic achievements, the school seeks always to promote students’ self-esteem and sense of belonging by acknowledging student engagement and other achievements. The OECD publication *Student Engagement At School* (2003) may assist further in this regard.

The only significant recommendation in this report relates to further policy development in the area of assessment. As well as the above-mentioned aspects of assessment, future policy development would be well served by examining the interplay between assessment and instruction. Reference to differentiating homework and other assessment practices would sit well with the school’s efforts to support all students with their learning and with the differentiated practices witnessed in the classrooms. The benefits to students’ learning that accrue from peer-assessment and self-assessment practices also merit consideration in the development of any future policy document on assessment.
Students’ written work was found to be regularly corrected, usually signed or stamped, dated and with concluding comments to encourage students in their learning. Teachers obviously give time in composing their comments and students were seen to value this. Error tolerance was witnessed in these corrections, as it was in the lessons visited, with students being praised where possible and guided when necessary.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The quality of provision and whole-school support for students identified with special educational needs is of a very high standard in St Mary’s.
- The promotion of inclusive practices is the norm in this school, with a clear understanding of the link between the promotion of inclusive practices and school improvement.
- Whole-school support is a palpable feature of the school, with clear leadership and a committed and dedicated special educational needs support team, who work together and with other staff to suitably challenge and support students in their learning.
- All additional resources, including additional teaching hours, are used appropriately and for the purposes for which they were intended. The school is appropriately responsive and flexible in attending to the wide range of needs presenting.
- The school’s flexible repertoire of responses to support learning includes in-class supports such as team-teaching.
- 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.
- Individual teacher planning and preparation, as witnessed during the inspection, was uniformly of a high quality and impacted very positively on the high standard of teaching and learning observed.
- All lessons were well structured and well paced with appropriate differentiation a regular feature of all lessons visited.
- The school engages in a comprehensive range of procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching.

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

- The only significant recommendation in this report relates to the school engaging in further policy development in the area of assessment, and to examine how such policy development can support the ongoing development of inclusive practices in St. Marys.

Post-evaluation meetings were held the members of the school’s special educational needs support team and principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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