Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Coláiste Íosagáin
Portarlington, County Laois
Roll number: 68068R

Date of inspection: 26 November 2009
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following an inspection of special educational needs (SEN) in Coláiste Íosagáin. 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 and deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Íosagáin has adopted a range of inclusive practices to meet the needs of a diverse population of students. Enrolment is open to students with a wide range of abilities and includes students requiring learning support and students with disabilities. Considering the school’s inclusive nature, it is regrettable that the admissions policy refers to the school’s ‘right to delay the commencement of an applicant’s admission pending the provision of required resources or required information’. This statement does not reflect the reality of the school’s inclusive practices and should be re-considered in the scheduled review of this policy. The school has an allocation from the National Council for Special Education of 72.125 resource-teaching hours for eight students in the low incidence category and twenty-three in the high incidence category as well as an allocation of one whole-time equivalent (WTE) for learning support. The management should ensure through careful monitoring that the utilisation of this allocation is always responsive to the individual needs of the students for whom it has been allocated. It is recommended therefore that the utilisation of resource hours be clearly documented to verify that they are being used for their intended purpose.

An appropriately-qualified teacher who holds a post of responsibility has been named as special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator. The co-ordinator is currently drafting a whole-school SEN policy which identifies three main areas within the role of the co-ordinator: time tabling, resource and learning-support teaching and administration to include planning, testing, recording, liaising with staff and outside agencies and meetings. In addition, the co-ordinator is responsible for identifying incoming students who require support, visiting the feeder schools, creating the learning-support classes, profiling students and developing individual education plans (IEPs), identifying students requiring assessment and supporting the Project Maths pilot programme. The co-ordinator has been given a significant amount of time for this work and as a result has significantly less time to use her expertise in teaching. The demand on the co-ordinator’s time to complete tasks, such as those of the IEP process and the individual assessment of students, varies throughout the school year. When the demands on time are lower, she engages in a flexible teaching-support role by providing in-class support and individual or small-group withdrawal to target specific individual needs. It is recommended that the school considers limiting the administrative workload assigned to the SEN co-ordinator by delegating to other staff. For
example, resource teachers might become more involved in the development of IEPs and the monitoring of students. It is also recommended that management ensures that the timetable accurately reflects the flexible and dual nature of the co-ordinator’s administrative and resource-teaching role.

Coláiste Íosagáin has an SEN team consisting of the SEN co-ordinator, the reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE) co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor and a tutor. The team meets once each term and minutes are kept. The school is advised that this team should meet more frequently to oversee the provision for students with SEN in the school and should consider sharing some of the many responsibilities assigned to the co-ordinator.

The school has a well-established system for identifying students with additional needs and gathering the information required to support them, through contact with the feeder schools and parents. In assigning students to first year classes, the school considers each student’s learning abilities and needs as indicated by psychological reports, the entry assessment results and discussions with the class and support teachers in the feeder schools. In each of the three junior cycle year groups, fifteen students are placed in a learning-support class. The stated intention of these smaller classes is to focus on the subjects of Mathematics and English and to provide more individualised attention for each student. At the time of the evaluation, only one-third of the students in these classes had diagnosed special educational needs. The students in the learning-support classes follow a reduced curriculum. They do not study Science or a modern foreign language. In the place of these subjects, students are scheduled for additional English and mathematics classes resulting in many students having more than ten mathematics and English classes each week. All students, including those with special educational needs, have the right to access a broad and balanced curriculum. This is a matter of equity.

As the practice of creating the learning-support classes is now in its third year, the school is recommended to conduct a full review in 2010. The review should include due consideration of the rationale for these classes and whether they are the best way to serve the individual needs of the students. Consideration should also be given to the selection criteria, the curriculum followed and the use of the resource hours of students within the class. During this review, the school is strongly urged to investigate other possible models of provision such as the creation of mixed-ability classes throughout first year with resource hours used to facilitate team teaching and a small amount of withdrawal for students with very specific needs. In second and third year, students with SEN might be catered for by a combination of setting in some subjects such as Mathematics, the deployment of resource hours to facilitate co-operative teaching and limited withdrawal.

The remainder of the classes in the junior cycle are mixed ability. Students in these classes, as well as students in senior cycle who have special educational needs or who require learning support, attend additional English or Mathematics classes during time allocated for Irish lessons if they are exempted from studying it and during the time for a modern foreign language, if they have opted out of studying one. A limited number of teachers, two of whom have post-graduate qualifications in the area, are involved in providing the support teaching for each year group. Many, but not all, students with special educational needs opt for the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme at senior cycle. The SEN co-ordinator collaborates with the LCA co-ordinator regarding these students by speaking with their parents, offering advice, assessing students and arranging continued support as required. This is good practice.

Coláiste Íosagáin has two special needs assistants (SNAs) who have been assigned to support three students with specific care needs. The SEN co-ordinator is responsible for the day-to-day
management of the SNAs. The co-ordinator plans with the SNAs each September and meets with them on the first Friday of every month and more often if needed. The SNAs are welcomed in all class rooms by staff and students. The SNAs use a reporting form to record incidents and observations. The parents are consulted, but there is minimal direct communication between the parents and the SNAs. Some information on the role of the SNAs is being prepared for the SEN policy document.

The school has two designated learning-support rooms that have been recently refurbished with presses and data projectors. The SEN co-ordinator receives a good annual budget to purchase resources and has acquired a good selection of resource materials, including software.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The SEN co-ordinator is in the process of developing a whole-school, special educational needs planning and policy folder. This is commendable. At the time of the evaluation, this folder contained drafts of documents on a range of important topics, including the organisation and objectives of the provision for students with assessed special educational needs and students requiring learning support, and the roles of the co-ordinator, resource teachers and special needs assistants. The folder also contained information on the school’s allocations, student and teacher timetables, lists of resources and more. This is a work in progress and a creditable one. The Department’s *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* is a good reference for the further development of this planning and policy folder.

There is an impressive system in place to provide teachers with a range of essential information on the needs and abilities of the students with additional needs, to inform the planning process. Oral information on new students with special educational needs is given at the September staff meeting. In addition, all teachers have access to student files and to the advice of the co-ordinator. Test results in reading and spelling for students in the learning-support classes are given annually to all teachers who teach these students in the mainstream or resource classes. The co-ordinator creates student profiles and education plans for all students in the learning-support classes. The subject teachers contribute by completing a form for the co-ordinator about the student’s strengths and the intended goals of the subject instruction. Individual students are also consulted in this process. Subject teachers then use the profiles and education plans in planning their lessons. This collaborative planning procedure is commendable. For the extra English and extra mathematics support classes, resource teachers plan the topics to be covered in collaboration with mainstream teachers.

One session of professional development has been presented for staff on students with hearing difficulties by the visiting teacher. The school has made a formal request to the Special Education Support Service (SESS) for staff support in the 2009/10 school year. The school is now advised to conduct an audit of the staff’s professional development needs to build the existing capacity to cope with students with additional learning and other needs through differentiated instruction and the employment of a full range of teaching methodologies and strategies in order to ensure quality teaching and learning for all students. Teachers will find that the SESS DVD *Differentiation in Action* and the SESS publication *Science Differentiation in Action* provide some practical strategies.

Only a few teachers in Coláiste Íosagáin provided their individual class plans for inspection and in these instances the quality of class planning was good. An examination of the documentation made available for inspection and conversations with teachers showed that teachers were unaware of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s *Guidelines for teachers of students with...*
**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Eleven lessons were visited during the course of the evaluation. Most observed teaching in the mainstream subject and learning-support classes was of good quality. Teachers were all positive in their efforts to provide individualised support for students and students were generally well behaved, mannerly and co-operative. The small numbers in many classes allowed an informal but constructive working atmosphere to prevail.

Good quality direct teaching was seen as well as some good examples of effective group work and pair work to promote independent learning. Learning was supported in many lessons through the use of a white board or a work sheet. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used in only one observed lesson despite the availability of data projectors in most classrooms. This is regrettable as ICT can be very effective in providing the visual reinforcement needed for learning. Good examples of active-learning strategies were observed in a number of classrooms including a Mathematics lesson where students grouped sweets by colour, then counted them to produce fractions to reinforce previous learning, and a Geography lesson where students worked in groups of three to match vocabulary cards to definition cards to consolidate learning. A number of strategies such as repetition and mnemonics were also used to good effect in these lessons.

The quality of teaching in the withdrawal, resource classes was not always good. Lessons tended to consist of generic subject support rather than any targeted individualised intervention. In some instances, the numbers in the classroom inhibited individualisation and this fact should be considered in future timetabling. While most students were engaged, some lessons were dominated by teachers in that there was too much teacher talk, not enough input from students and little effort made to check understanding. Students should have been involved more as active learners. It is recommended that the school management address these issues by developing a long-term plan for the professional development of all teaching staff in a range of methodologies and instructional techniques for students with special educational needs. This capacity building plan should begin with the audit of staff training needs referred to earlier in this report.

**ASSESSMENT**

In Coláiste Íosagáin there is both positive policy and practice in assessment. A good range of age-appropriate tests are in use as part of the entrance testing and for diagnostic testing. Students are tested on entry using standardised tests of literacy attainment and reasoning ability. The latter test helps in the understanding of each student’s potential and learning style. First-year students are re-tested in literacy skills later in first year. Second-year and third-year students are assessed in literacy skills at the end of each year and other students are tested as the need arises, such as to support applications for reasonable accommodations in state exams. All results are recorded and can be used to track individual progress throughout the junior and senior cycle. All the test information is shared with the teaching staff. Test results are stored securely along with professional reports and student profiles. The SEN co-ordinator summarises pertinent information from the psychological reports for the student profiles. Teachers taking resource hours or providing learning support are asked to keep records of student achievement and to provide students with regular feedback on their individual progress.
Teachers are asked to identify students who may require reasonable accommodations in the certificate examinations every year by completing a form for the SEN co-ordinator during the first term. Identified students, who have not undergone a psychological assessment previously, are referred to the school’s National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) psychologist by the SEN co-ordinator.

In most of the visited classrooms, homework was seen to be set, collected and corrected by teachers and recorded in journals by students. In all cases, homework involved appropriate tasks for students with additional needs and often consisted of completing work begun in class. This is good practice in that it reinforces the work done in class and provides students with the skills and confidence to complete it. It would be beneficial for teachers to add a short but challenging additional exercise to this type of homework to promote a degree of independent learning.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Coláiste Íosagáin has adopted a range of inclusive practices to meet the needs of a diverse population of students.
- An appropriately-qualified teacher who holds a post of responsibility has been named as special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator.
- The school has a well-established system for identifying students with additional needs and gathering the information required to support them through contact with the feeder schools and parents.
- The school has two designated learning-support rooms and a good selection of resource materials, including software.
- The SEN co-ordinator is in the process of developing a new whole-school special educational needs planning and policy folder.
- There is an impressive system in place to provide teachers with a range of essential information on the needs and abilities of the students with additional needs in order to inform the planning process.
- Most observed teaching in the mainstream subject and learning-support classes was of good quality.
- Teachers were all positive in their efforts to provide individualised support for students and students were generally well behaved, mannerly and co-operative.
- In Coláiste Íosagáin there is both positive policy and practice in 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 utilisation of resource hours be clearly documented to verify that they are being used for their intended purpose.
- It is recommended that the school limits the administrative workload assigned to the co-ordinator and that the timetable accurately reflects the flexible and dual nature of the co-ordinator’s administrative and resource-teaching role.
- As the practice of creating the learning-support classes is now in its third year, the school is recommended to conduct a review in 2010.
- It recommended that the school management address the quality of teaching in some classes by developing a long-term plan for the professional development of all teaching staff in a range of methodologies and instructional techniques for students with special educational needs.
A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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