

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Education  
REPORT**

**Portlaoise College,  
Mountrath Road,  
Portlaoise, County Laois.  
Roll number: 71510A**

**Date of inspection: 12 May 2016**



**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION (SEN)**

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**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Dates of inspection</b>	10 and 12 May 2016
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review of relevant documents</li><li>• Discussion with principal, SEN Coordinator, and teachers</li><li>• Interaction with students</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Observation of teaching and learning during eight class periods</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers.</li></ul>

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- The quality of teaching in all mainstream classes and support settings was of a very high standard.
- All teachers demonstrated an insightful awareness of the needs and strengths of the students, and differentiation strategies were well-developed and very effectively utilised.
- The students would benefit from more opportunities to work collaboratively in pairs and to discuss ideas and problem-solve in lessons.
- School management is reflective and flexible in providing for students with SEN, and Portlaoise College is inclusive in its practices at whole-school and individual teacher level.
- The SEN team of four teachers all of whom have acquired high levels of expertise and appropriate qualifications in special education, provide very good quality holistic support for students with SEN.
- Student support plans are devised by the SEN team, and include contributions from parents and subject teachers in line with very good practice.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- All teachers are advised to incorporate active and interactive learning opportunities for students, through facilitating collaborative learning, and utilising investigative and problem-solving approaches as part of their teaching practices.
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Portlaoise College is a co-educational school with a current enrolment of 749 students, 388 of whom are post-primary students, with an additional 361 students enrolled in Post Leaving Certificate programmes. The school operates under the patronage of the Laois Offaly Education and Training Board, and participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in our Schools (DEIS). The school provides Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year, Leaving Certificate, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. An evaluation of special education provision was conducted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills over a period of two days, during which teaching and learning were observed in eight learning settings.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- The quality of teaching in all mainstream classes and support settings was of a very high standard. All teachers were very well prepared. Lessons were very well structured and purposeful and teachers demonstrated very high levels of skill and competence in their subject areas, and in their support for students with special educational needs. The team of six special needs assistants have clearly defined roles. They make a very valuable contribution to the care and support of their assigned students.
- All lessons had clear aims and intended learning outcomes, and these were shared with students at the start of class. Continuity with prior learning was emphasised, and lesson content was placed within practical contexts. Particular attention was paid to subject specific language.
- The use of assessment data and on-going monitoring of progress is very effective. Assessment for learning strategies were embedded in teachers' practices. Individual student progress was carefully monitored throughout lessons.
- In supplementary small group lessons teachers correctly placed emphasis on making learning meaningful for the students. They balanced curriculum support with very appropriate good quality literacy, numeracy, and social skills development, based on the needs of the students.
- Support teachers and subject teachers demonstrated an insightful awareness of the needs of the students and used a range of approaches and resources to support learning and comprehension. To complement this good practice, all teachers are advised to incorporate more active and interactive learning opportunities for students through facilitating collaborative learning, and utilising investigative and problem-solving approaches as part of their teaching practices.
- Students enjoyed working with their own individual ICT tablets, and teachers prudently utilised tablets to enhance learning experiences. Effective differentiation and on-going monitoring of learning supported them in achieving good learning outcomes. However, students would benefit from more opportunities to work collaboratively in pairs and to talk and problem-solve in small groups.
- Students were generally very appreciative of the extra supports they receive in-class and in small groups. The students are highly commended for their excellent behaviour both during lessons and throughout the school.

## **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- School management is reflective and flexible in the organisation of provision for students with SEN. Historically, students have been welcomed and included by both management and teachers at Portlaoise College. The school is inclusive in its practices at whole-school and individual teacher level.
- The core SEN team of four teachers all of whom have acquired high levels of expertise and appropriate qualifications in special education, provide very good quality holistic support for students with SEN. A co-ordinated approach to timetabling enables the SEN team to deliver all supplementary support teaching, augmented by subject teacher participation in team teaching.
- In-class support is balanced with small-group withdrawal for literacy, numeracy, and social skills development, and is generally supplementary to mainstream subject lessons. Continuity of individual support, and continuity of support from one year to the next is carefully planned and implemented. This is very good practice.
- The school carefully monitors deployment of resources to ensure that supplementary teaching models deliver as much in-class support as is appropriate. Team teachers plan their lessons collaboratively, and the four special education teachers provide in-class co-teaching support for students.
- Students with special educational needs, including students who are enrolled in the ASD special class, and students with additional learning needs are all provided with a broad and balanced curriculum, with their peers, in inclusive mixed-ability classes. The key role that subject teachers play in supporting all learners is emphasised. This model of full integration and inclusive support provision is highly commended.
- Staff training and upskilling is prioritised by management. The school engages with support agencies to a high level, and in particular has accessed whole-school in-service from the Professional Development Service for Teachers and the Special Education Support Service.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- SEN department planning is supported and facilitated by senior management, and the school's SEN policy has been recently reviewed to reflect current practices and provision. The SEN co-ordinator actively promotes the sharing of information through a shared SEN folder, and through well-developed collaborative practices with team members and subject teachers.
- Student support plans are devised by the SEN team, and include input from parents and subject teachers in line with very good practice. These plans are very appropriate in many aspects. The inclusion of more specific and assessable learning and social skills targets would enrich the effectiveness of the plans, and would facilitate detailed tracking of students' prioritised learning achievements and social skills development.
- The whole-school approach to assessment is regularly reviewed to meet the changing needs of students. Information from feeder schools is combined with school based assessments to identify students in need of early intervention, and to provide appropriate supports for students with special educational needs. Partnership with parents is a well-established practice.

- Links with a large number of primary schools facilitate the effective transfer of in-coming students. Base line assessments, portfolios of work, and subject assessments are combined to monitor progress, and address emerging needs of all of the students. The team has identified a need for periodic re-testing to formally track and record learning progress, and plans are underway to implement a re-testing programme.
- The school has the capacity to self-monitor and develop its highly effective student-centred SEN provision, as demonstrated by its very flexible approach to planning, timetabling, evaluating and reviewing, to meet the changing needs of students, year on year. School self-evaluation is very well progressed, and whole-school strategies and interventions in literacy and numeracy were evidenced in classrooms, learning settings, and throughout the school.

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The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal, and SEN team members. 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.