

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs  
REPORT**

**Saint Patrick's College  
Cavan, Co. Cavan  
Roll number: 61060M**

**Date of inspection: 26 March 2010**



**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 an inspection of special educational needs (SEN) in St Patrick's College, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the provision and teaching and learning in special educational needs (SEN) and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject 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 principal. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. 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. Patrick's College in Cavan is a voluntary secondary school for boys with a population of 580 students. The school's admissions' policy offers a clear welcome to students with special educational needs (SEN) and includes a pledge to make reasonable accommodations to support students. All students are encouraged and expected to participate in all aspects of school life. The principal evinces a positive attitude towards inclusion. It is his view that all teachers are responsible for special educational needs students. This maxim is the motivation for his endeavours to progress the organisation and provision for students with SEN and for students requiring learning support. For the school year 2009-10, the school has a total allocation from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) of fourteen teaching hours to support eight students identified with low and high incidence SEN. In addition, the school has a learning support allocation of 1.0 WTE as well as a full-time learning support teacher on long-term secondment from a local national school. These additional support hours are used principally by the school to support students experiencing academic difficulties in Mathematics and English. The school is able to provide more than the minimum allocated hours of support to the students with SEN by timetabling the students into small groups. This is a flexible and appropriate use of the hours.

The organisation of the provision for resource and learning support is outlined in the school's resource department policy. This document was drafted by the resource teachers and is reviewed annually. The policy provides information on the modes of intervention and also details the school's identification, screening and referral procedures for students in need of support. It outlines the role of the principal, the subject departments, the class teachers and the learning support/resource teachers. When next reviewed, the details of the agreed role of the co-ordinator should be added and the role of the class teachers should be expanded to include the use of inclusive teaching practices such as differentiation and planning for individual needs. The school might also consider revising the document as a whole-school policy on inclusion. The *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) will be a useful reference in this process.

The overall process of transferring from the feeder primary schools to the school is ably overseen by the guidance counsellor. With the support of school management, the guidance counsellor has evolved a range of pro-active procedures to gather information on students which eases their transition and supports whole-school planning. The parents of prospective students are invited to an enrolment evening prior to the sitting of the entrance tests. The invitation repeats the school's welcome to students with special educational needs. At the meeting, the parents of students who have special needs along with the parents of students for whom English is an additional language, students who hold an exemption from the study of Irish or students who are not of the Catholic faith, are asked to complete a student profile form to provide the school with additional information.

Incoming first-year students sit tests in reasoning ability, reading comprehension and free writing in the February prior to entry. The results of these tests, along with the information gathered from the feeder primary schools and the parents/guardians, is analysed by the resource teachers. Students meeting the school's criteria are selected as probable recipients of learning support for the autumn. In early September, these students are administered a range of diagnostic tests by the resource team and later their parents are invited to attend a meeting so that the support team can explain how support is organised in the school. At this meeting parents are asked to sign a letter giving their consent to the support offered. The resource teachers then draw up a time table for learning support for the first term. The targeting of support for first-year students is good practice as is the school's review of first-year students receiving support which takes place at the end of the first term. This review looks at each student's performance in the end-of-term examinations as well as any recommendations made by the subject teachers and the resource teachers. The review results in a number of students discontinuing attendance for support and the identification of a few students who had not been initially identified. Parents and class teachers are notified of any actions taken on foot of this review.

Since 2008, all incoming students are placed in mixed-ability classes for the duration of the junior cycle. All students, including those with SEN, have full access to all subjects and benefit from the school's practice of offering taster courses and guidance in subject selection. Students receiving support are withdrawn from a range of classes. It is school policy to try to provide support during Irish for students who are exempt from the study of Irish and to not withdraw students from practical classes. Classes in the senior cycle are set according to subject options chosen by students and the level of study. A number of students in the senior cycle still requiring subject support continue to be withdrawn.

All support provision in St. Patrick's College is through withdrawal. The school tries to minimise the number of individual withdrawal sessions in favour of small groups of two to three students. However, a number of issues arise from the school's practice of total reliance on withdrawal as a means of providing support. It is strongly recommended that the school examine other options including the use of team teaching or the creation of smaller classes, possibly foundation-level classes, timetabled at the same time as the subject classes. It is understood that there has been some limited engagement with team teaching in the school. The practice is mentioned in the school's resource department policy, but no teachers were timetabled for team teaching during the time of the evaluation. A significant value of co-operative teaching approaches such as team teaching is that additional teaching support can be provided to students without withdrawing them from the mainstream class groupings. The mainstream teacher is supported by a colleague in providing the curriculum to a range of students, including those with additional learning needs. Collaboration among teachers is facilitated and the inclusion of students with learning differences is promoted. Team teaching can be an effective use of the available resources while eliminating

the negative factors associated with withdrawal. The main objective should be to avoid the many problems inherent in a system totally dependant on withdrawal and to provide a number of arrangements that will significantly reduce the amount of withdrawal sessions. Section 2.5.2 of the *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) provides some information on organising support.

In conversation, the principal expressed some concern about the teaching staff's capacity for coping with the challenges of mixed-ability teaching and inclusive classrooms. In preparation for the move to mixed-ability classes in the junior cycle, the staff received input on differentiation from the Second Level Support Service a few years ago. The school would find it useful now to contact the Special Education Support Service to seek further support to develop inclusive practices and methodologies for mixed-ability teaching. The school is also encouraged to avail of the skills of the resource team in providing input during staff meetings regarding specific support strategies. It is recommended therefore that the school conduct an audit of the staff's professional development needs to support mixed-ability teaching and the full inclusion of students with special educational needs.

The school might also consider additional ways to support mainstream subject teachers. One possible measure is the further development of the existing student register. Currently this document lists the students who receive support along with the names of the resource teachers and the times of withdrawal. The list could be enhanced by providing subject teachers with advice in relation to how best to support each individual student in their classroom. The school might also develop a resource area either in a room accessible to all staff such as the school library or virtually through the school's website. This area could provide specific information on a range of topics including general and specific learning disabilities, inclusive teaching strategies, differentiation, co-operative teaching and learning and mixed ability.

The school informally supports students who are exceptionally gifted or talented by encouraging their participation in activities such as the school musical and drama productions and the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition. The school is advised to consider developing whole-school policy to formally guide the identification and support of such students. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's publication, *Gifted and Talented Pupils Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2007) can provide useful advice to support this process.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Amongst its staff, the school has four resource teachers with post-graduate qualifications in relevant areas. One of these teachers is currently studying for a master's degree in the area of special education. These four teachers provide most of the support teaching. Commendably, there is only minimal use of other non-qualified staff in providing support. The teacher responsible for co-ordinating the resource department holds a special duties post of responsibility. The co-ordinator and two of the resource teachers are timetabled for a weekly planning meeting. Minutes of these meetings are kept. The resource department maintains a folder for each student attending for support. This folder contains psychological and other assessment reports as well as the results of in-school testing and school term reports and any notes of any communication with parents/guardians. The resource department co-ordinator reads and interprets the psychological reports and disseminates a summary with recommendations to the students' mainstream teachers to inform their planning. The resource department policy states that programme planning involves meetings between the resource teachers and parents/guardians, consultations with the class teachers and reference to psychological reports and other relevant data. This is a positive practice.

The resource department policy makes no reference to the use of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, 2007* for classroom planning. The policy does state that individual subject teachers liaise with the resource department concerning students in their own class with special needs and that intervention in the area of English focuses on the development of language, spelling, personal writing, and written comprehension skills, while Mathematics intervention focuses on the development of mathematical procedures, skills and concepts. Good evidence of this practice was seen during the observations of lessons and in the planning for individual students. The resource teachers maintain informal contact with the subject teachers and monitor student progress by examining class work copies and by questioning students about their specific learning needs. As individual subject planning documentation was not made available during the evaluation, management should ensure that each subject department has information on how students with SEN are supported in each subject plan.

The school has not yet engaged with the formal process of individualised planning, so should now consider how best to progress the existing good practice so that the individual needs of all students with special educational needs can be addressed on a whole-school basis. The National Council for Special Education's *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process (2006)* can be of assistance in this regard.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Seven withdrawal sessions providing support in Mathematics and English were observed during the evaluation and some good teaching practices were discerned. Most teachers introduced the lesson well and shared the expected outcomes with the students. This helped the students to focus on the learning. In one example of good practice, students were asked to summarise learning at the end of lesson. This self-reinforcing activity was effective. In all classrooms, lessons were paced to suit the learners and there was significant repetition and reinforcement of the learning. Subject-specific vocabulary was introduced, explained and used successfully. In some lessons, learning could have been enhanced with the employment of co-operative learning activities.

In Mathematics, direct instruction and guided learning were the principle modes of delivery. Examples of problems were worked out on the board by the teacher or in student copy books with each step explained in detail. Teachers also used their own and commercially-prepared worksheets as well as text books and past certificate examination papers for both demonstration and practice. Calculators were used to check work. In one English lesson observed, where mechanical and creative aspects of writing were being taught, brainstorming, visual imagery, concrete examples and mnemonics were all used effectively to promote learning.

In all classrooms visited, teachers were caring and supportive of their students. A sound understanding of learning difficulties was evidenced in the teaching. Teachers displayed an intimate knowledge of the students' learning preferences and used this to ensure their participation while maintaining high expectations regarding the ability of the students to achieve. Students were well-behaved and motivated. They engaged in appropriate-level work and were consistently appreciative of the help that they were given. Teachers left classroom doors open during all one-to-one withdrawal sessions. This is consistent with child protection guidance.

There are three designated resource rooms. Each classroom has a computer and printer and some have digital projectors. The rooms are comfortable and their walls are decorated with subject-

relevant posters and displays of student work. Each room is well-resourced with teaching and reference materials. The school's resource department does not have a budget, but, according to the teachers, requests to the principal for resources are never refused.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Student progress is monitored on an on-going basis by the resource teachers at their weekly meetings. There are also discussions on student progress with the school's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the guidance counsellor, the parents and relevant outside agencies at irregular intervals. All student records, including psychological and assessment reports, school term reports, attendance records and records of meetings with parents, are the joint responsibility of the principal, the guidance counsellor and the resource teachers and they are kept secure.

The school's resource department policy does not give any guidance on assigning homework in the withdrawal lessons. Mixed practice was observed with some teachers giving homework and some not. Some students claimed that they did not get homework as they were expected to do the homework in the class they were withdrawn from, but this was not always the case. Homework that was given was corrected at the beginning of lessons and often used by the teacher as a starting point for the next lesson. The resource teachers should agree on an approach to homework and include it in the revised resource department policy document and the school's whole-school policy on homework.

A number of different screening and diagnostic tests are used in the school as part of the procedures to identify students in need of support and to diagnose individual learning needs. It is good practice to regularly review the screening and diagnostic tests that are used in a school to ensure that they continue to reliably provide the information which the school seeks. Tests date and it may be that there are other tests that can provide more accurate information. The school is recommended to conduct such a review with reference to the Department's list of *Tests approved for use for guidance and/or learning support in post-primary schools*. The most recent list can be found on the websites [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie). This review of tests might be conducted as part of the development of a whole-school assessment policy.

The overall progress of students in St. Patrick's College is monitored by a combination of class work, homework, teacher observation, class tests and end of term assessments. Progress is communicated to parents through school reports, journals, homework and test corrections, parent-teacher meetings, and by phone calls when considered necessary. For students with special educational needs and for those receiving learning support, it would be useful to ensure that parents receive some formal written record of their progress either by an addition to the existing school report form or through the use of an independent form designed solely for this purpose.

The school facilitates eligible students in their application for reasonable accommodations in the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Examinations. The school offers students training and opportunities to experience the accommodations before the actual examinations in the classroom and during some of the mock examinations to ensure the effectiveness of these accommodations.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The enrolment/admissions policy of St Patrick's College offers a clear welcome to students with special educational needs.
- The principal evinces a positive attitude towards inclusion. It is his view that all teachers are responsible for SEN students.
- The organisation of the provision for resource and learning support is outlined in the school's resource department policy which is reviewed annually.
- With the support of the school, the guidance counsellor has evolved a range of procedures to gather information on incoming students which eases their transition and supports whole-school planning.
- The school has set criteria for identifying students in need of support and for the discontinuation of support.
- A team of resource teachers under the leadership of a co-ordinator provide most of the support teaching and meet weekly to plan and to monitor student progress.
- A range of good teaching practices were observed. Teachers were knowledgeable and caring.

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

- It is strongly recommended that the school examine other options including the use of team teaching or the creation of smaller classes, possibly foundation-level classes, timetabled at the same time as the subject classes.
- It is recommended that the school conduct an audit of the staff's professional development needs to support mixed-ability teaching and the full inclusion of students with special educational needs.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.