

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole School Evaluation
REPORT**

**St Declan's Special NS
Northumberland Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
Uimhir rolla: 18569J**

Date of inspection: 23 Nov. 2011



1. Introduction

St Declan's is a co-educational special school founded in 1958 by the Society of Jesus, under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, for pupils with mild emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). Pupils of other denominations also attend this school which strives to promote an inclusive environment. The school caters for pupils of primary school age, including classes for pupils with high functioning autism. Current enrolment is forty-eight. The school endeavours to address the particular learning needs of pupils within a set time-frame and to facilitate their return to mainstream settings. There is continuing demand for places and many pupils travel a considerable distance to attend. Psychological referral is a requirement for enrolment. Most pupils avail of the Department of Education and Skills school transport scheme. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the **main strengths** of the work of the school:

- The work and development of the school are supported by a dedicated and very effective board of management.
- The principal and in-school management team lead the school in a highly committed, capable and focussed manner.
- The teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) demonstrate high levels of skilled collaborative practice in supporting the pupils' engagement across the range of school activities.
- The school provides a welcoming, supportive and structured environment in which the holistic needs of the pupils are addressed.
- The recently implemented individual education planning process contributes beneficially to the learning and support programmes undertaken in the school.
- Regular communication with the parents and guardians of the pupils facilitates their active involvement in the life of the school community.
- A consistent school-wide approach is adopted in meeting the range of learning and care needs of the pupils arising from EBD.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- Building on planning undertaken to date, agreed processes, targets and timeframes should be set out for the development and implementation of prioritised areas of the school plan.
- In reviewing the school's assessment policy, a whole-school framework should be developed to further support the monitoring of the pupils' programmes while attending the school.
- In the light of original school policy and taking pupil progress into account, and to support the inclusion of pupils in mainstream settings, school practices on the length of time pupils attend St. Declan's should be reviewed.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is properly constituted and includes members with a wide range of experience and expertise who work in a proactive and very effective manner in support of the evolving mission of the school. The board conscientiously attends to its duties including the management of finances and the ratification of school policies. The members of the board are commended for their dedicated and ongoing work on behalf of the school community.
- The work of the principal is characterised by a highly committed, collaborative and effective approach in her leadership of the school. A co-operative and mutually respectful school culture is in evidence. The principal is actively supported in the management of the school by a very capable and diligent deputy-principal and in-school management team. Post-holders undertake a range of responsibilities in relation to the organisational, curricular, and pastoral work of the school and communicate frequently with staff colleagues who also contribute significantly to the development of the school.
- Staffing consists of eight teachers, including the principal, and eight SNAs. The school staff conscientiously attend to the learning and care needs of the pupils. The teachers have a range of professional backgrounds. Most have postgraduate training in special education and considerable experience of working with pupils with EBD. Most of the SNAs have also accessed relevant training. The board of management is supportive of continuing staff professional development.
- While the school site has limitations, very good use is made of the available accommodation and facilities. Classrooms, assembly areas and grounds are maintained to a high standard. The school environment is bright and welcoming. The classrooms are attractively presented and have a range of equipment and resources. Displays in classroom and circulation areas include curriculum material and the work and achievements of the pupils are prominently displayed. Where practicable, opportunities to share good practice in the use of ICT in classrooms should be extended.
- The school facilitates ongoing communication between home and school through school diaries and other contacts. Commendable practice is in evidence as parents have ready access to the principal, teachers and SNAs. Parent-teacher meetings are held regularly. An active parents' association supports the work of the school and contributes to the development of resources and to areas of school policy. Information events are also organised during the school year.
- The careful and skilful management of the pupils generally, and in relation to their specific needs arising from EBD is highly praised. Respectful and positive teacher-pupil interaction is in evidence across the school. Elements of the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and behaviour management programmes are consistently implemented and applied throughout the school day. Specific programmes of learning support for individual pupils are regularly implemented. To further facilitate the involvement of pupils in the school community, the introduction of a pupils' council is advised. Where practicable, the beneficial links that have been established with a number of mainstream schools should be extended and broadened to other schools. In the light of original school policy and taking pupil progress into account, and to support the inclusion of pupils in mainstream settings, school practices on the length of time pupils attend St. Declan's should be reviewed.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- This school has engaged in a number of purposeful school development planning exercises over several years. Considerable and valuable collaborative work has been undertaken in relation to planning in the organisational, curricular and pastoral areas. Several key policies have been developed and others are at various stages of revision and development. Building on the planning undertaken to date, agreed processes, targets and timeframes should be set out for the progression and implementation of prioritised areas for future school development planning.
- The recently implemented individual education planning process contributes beneficially to the pupils' IEPs and the learning support programmes undertaken across the school. Individual teacher planning identifies priorities and approaches to address the pupils' learning needs across the curriculum areas and incorporate differentiated approaches.
- Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Good quality teaching and learning is in evidence throughout the school. Lessons are taught with a high level of competence and the pupils' interest and engagement are actively fostered. The well-organised classroom learning environments facilitate the pupils in accessing and participating in the lessons. Building on existing good use of group and pair work, consideration should be given to extending the use of co-operative learning strategies in classrooms. Where possible consideration should also be given to the use of team-teaching approaches with some class groups and for particular curriculum areas.
- The teachers conscientiously monitor the pupils' work and progress. A variety of assessment approaches, including classroom observation, checklists, pupil profiles and standardised tests is used to track the progress. Homework is corrected regularly and the pupils are provided with constructive feedback. In reviewing the school's assessment policy, a whole-school framework should be developed to further support the monitoring of the pupils' programmes while attending the school. Consideration should also be given to implementing a baseline assessment when pupils are enrolled in St. Declan's.
- Many pupils have difficulties in the area of language and there is an appropriate focus on their expressive and receptive language development needs. Careful attention is also given to the promotion of the pupils' literacy skills. The pupils engage purposefully during lessons, which are suitably differentiated. Circle-time approaches and discussion are beneficially employed. A range of whole-language activities, using story, novels, poetry and rhyme is employed. Direct teaching is also employed in particular areas such as vocabulary development, sight-word recognition and grammar. Due attention is given to reinforcing the pupils' oral language skills, reading and writing through a range of structured activities. To promote the development of fluency in reading and comprehension skills, pupils are encouraged to read independently in school and at home. A paired reading programme has also been successfully introduced. A range of approaches is used to promote the pupils' writing skills including hand-writing lessons, creative writing activities and cross-curricular projects based on specific topics of interest.

- Tá díolúine ó staidéar na Gaeilge ag formhór na ndaltaí. É sin ráite, tá straitéis úsáideach ag an scoil maidir leis an nGaeilge a dhíríonn ar ghnéithe ó bhéil an chláir agus ar Ghaeilge neamhfhoirmiúil.

The majority of pupils have exemptions from learning Irish. However, the school has a useful approach for Irish which focuses on the oral aspects of the programme and the use of incidental Irish.

- In Mathematics, the teachers endeavour to provide the pupils with opportunities to have positive learning experiences. The learning tasks are differentiated and a variety of methodologies is employed. Concrete and visual materials are used effectively. The pupils are supported in becoming active learners and lessons are well-structured to enable them to acquire concepts and practice skills. There is a good emphasis on the use of practical tasks, mathematical language, and the linking of the lessons to the environment and experiences of the pupils. Cross-curricular links are also usefully explored.
- In the area of Social Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), a broad range of activities is undertaken in History, Geography and Science. The pupils engage purposefully and productively in a variety of thematic projects related to their interests and supporting language and literacy development. Good use is made of available resources, including ICT. An appreciation and respect for the environment is fostered. Consideration should be given to reviving the school's involvement in the Green Schools programme. Good levels of pupil engagement and enjoyment in Music, the Visual Arts and Drama are in evidence. The programme in Physical Education (PE) provides for a good range of activities, including swimming, and the pupils were observed enjoying and participating beneficially in well-structured PE lessons. The staff are conscious of the role of SPHE in the context of the pupils' particular learning needs. Personal, social and behavioural issues are consistently addressed. Positive attitudes, values and habits are actively promoted.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- St. Declan's has developed and continues to extend a range of whole-school policies and approaches to addressing the learning and care needs of the pupils. The school team adopts a committed and highly skilled approach in working collaboratively to support the pupils' development. There is ongoing consultation with the parents and guardians of the pupils. Careful planning and monitoring of progress is undertaken. A limited range of support services is available. A NEPS psychologist is assigned to the school and provides advice in relation to individual pupils and programmes. The school liaises regularly with a variety of Health Service providers and endeavours to work collaboratively and to access additional supports on behalf of the pupils.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

On behalf of the school community of St. Declan's Special School, the B.O.M. acknowledges and would like to thank the inspectorate of the D.E.S. for the courteous, professional and affirming manner in which the evaluation was conducted. We welcome the report, highlighting as it does the 'committed and highly skilled approach' of the whole school team in 'working collaboratively to support the pupils' development.'

We especially appreciate the inspectorate's high praise of the 'careful and skilful management of the pupils generally and in relation to their specific needs arising from EBD.'

The B.O.M wishes to thank all of the partners involved in making St. Declan's such a supportive and caring environment. The ongoing dedication of our staff and their commitment to the holistic development of our pupils is recognised and much appreciated. We also recognize that the positive and whole-hearted engagement of parents in supporting the work of the school is a cornerstone of our success.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board acknowledges the recommendations of the report and welcomes its suggestions for further development and implementation of the areas identified as priorities in the school plan. This work is in progress.

A comprehensive review of the school's assessment policy is underway and the advice of the S.E.S.S. and N.E.P.S is being sought with view to the development of a whole-school framework and baseline assessment for new entrants to further support the assessment approaches currently in use.

The B.O.M. is reviewing the school's enrolment policy and will engage with the inspectorate and the N.C.S.E. on ways forward to support the inclusion of pupils in mainstream settings.