

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Whole School Evaluation  
REPORT**

**Benincasa Special School  
Merrion Avenue  
Blackrock  
Co. Dublin  
Uimhir rolla: 18863J**

**Date of inspection: 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF  
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

## 1. Introduction

Benincasa School is a co-educational special school for pupils with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Established by the Dominican Sisters in the late 1950s the school operates under the trusteeship of the Congregation of Dominican Sisters, Cabra and the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. At the time of the evaluation the school had an enrolment of 48 pupils ranging in age from four to sixteen years. Pupils are referred to the school following psychological and psychiatric assessment. The majority of the pupils avail of school transport provided under the Department of Education and Skills scheme and travel to the school from a wide catchment area. The board of management of the school 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 an effective board of management led by a dedicated chairperson.
- The learning needs of the pupils are provided for in a welcoming and supportive school environment.
- The work of the principal, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) is characterised by a strong commitment to meeting the special and often complex behavioural and educational needs of pupils.
- There are high levels of collaboration and team work among teachers, SNAs and other professionals working in the school.
- The school has a good range of resources to support teaching and learning, and pupils' achievements in a number of curricular areas are celebrated through attractive displays in classrooms and around the school.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- With the planned move to improved new facilities, the board of management, in consultation with other members of the school community, should formulate a strategic plan to guide the future direction and development of the school.
- The board of management should review the school's attendance policy as a matter of priority. A re-configuration of the programme offered to post-primary age pupils should form an integral part of this review.
- A whole-school policy on assessment should be prioritised for development by the school principal and staff.
- The individual education planning (IEP) process requires strengthening in relation to the writing of specific curricular and behavioural targets. Teachers should ensure that the targets are specific and measurable and use these targets to systematically track pupils' progress.
- To meet the evolving challenges and needs of the school, areas of in-school management (ISM) responsibility should be reviewed and whole-school team processes should be further strengthened to include regular planning meetings of ISM and other staff.

### 3. Quality of School Management

- The work and development of the school are supported by an effective board of management led by a dedicated chairperson. The board of management works hard in the interest of the school and its pupils. It meets regularly and represents the views of all stakeholders well. The board should ensure that all policies are ratified, signed and dated. With the planned move to improved new school facilities, it is timely for the board in consultation with members of the school community to develop a strategic plan to guide the future direction and development of the school over the next number of years.
- The school has identified the poor attendance of a significant number of pupils, particularly post-primary age pupils as an area of serious concern. As a matter of priority the board should review the school's current attendance policy. As part of the review consideration should be given to the appropriateness of the programmes provided for post-primary age pupils. In addition, the school should further develop liaison with other professionals working with the pupils and their families.
- The principal is strongly committed to the ongoing development of the school. He is ably assisted by the deputy principal and other staff members. Staff are well supported in the maintenance of appropriate behaviour among the pupils. To address the evolving challenges and needs of the school, the areas of ISM responsibility should be reviewed and whole-school team processes should be further developed. Formal meetings of ISM and other teachers should be held regularly, minutes recorded and reports from ISM should contribute to staff and board meetings.
- The school staff comprises eight class teachers, one of whom is deployed as a resource teacher, a part-time cookery and art teacher funded by the Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. Occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services are provided by Lucena Clinic on a part-time basis. The school has fifteen special needs assistants (SNAs) plus one child-care worker. There are high levels of collaboration and team work among teachers, SNAs and other professionals working in the school which effectively facilitate the core activities of the school.
- Classroom environments are attractive and print-rich and pupils' achievements are celebrated through high quality displays of their work in a number of curriculum areas. Classrooms are well equipped and a range of information and communications technology is available (ICT). Efficient secretarial and ancillary supports contribute to the effective running of the school.
- The school has an open, welcoming and supportive school environment and parents are encouraged to be involved in and to support their children's education. Home-school communication is maintained by means of a homework journal and a behaviour record that the pupils take home regularly. Formal parent-teacher meetings are held annually and informal meetings take place as required. Parents are also offered a role in the development of IEPs. Because of the distances travelled by pupils to the school and the difficult circumstances of some parents, it has proven difficult to establish and maintain a parents' association. The school should continue in its efforts to establish a parents' association. Responses in the parents' questionnaires indicate overall positive views of the school and the teaching provided.
- Very good care and management of the pupils was in evidence during the evaluation. Many positive and beneficial interactions among pupils and staff were observed in

classrooms. In the pupils' questionnaires most pupils indicated that they feel safe in school. All members of staff have received training in *Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI)* and very good efforts are made to consistently implement behaviour strategies. To build on the good work done to date further consideration should be given to increasing the emphasis in the pupils' learning programmes on the development and use of self-regulation strategies.

#### **4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation**

- The board, principal and staff have undertaken a number of development planning and school self-evaluation activities. In so doing, policy has been developed in relation to a range of organisational, curricular and pastoral areas of the work of the school. Currently the school has no overall assessment policy. A whole-school policy on assessment should be developed by the school principal and staff as a matter of priority. The aim of the policy should be to clarify the rationale and purposes of the various aspects of the assessment process and should include a review of the current instruments and approaches, the use of baseline and criterion referenced testing and the role of the IEP in the assessment process.
- A variety of practice is in evidence in relation to classroom planning. A high standard of planning and preparation was in evidence in some classrooms and this good practice should be shared across the school. All teachers complete monthly progress reports. These could usefully be used as a tool for measuring the continuity and progression of pupils across curriculum areas. While individualised education planning (IEP) is undertaken for all pupils, the school's IEP process would benefit from further strengthening in relation to the writing of specific curricular and behavioural targets. Teachers should ensure that targets are specific and measurable and can be used effectively to track pupils' progress. In order to further support the advancement of self-awareness and self-management skills of students, consideration should be given to increasing the emphasis in their learning programmes on the development and use of self-regulation strategies.

#### **Child protection policy and procedures**

- Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and 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**

- Effective teaching was observed in classrooms across the school. The teachers demonstrate good awareness of the diverse range of learning needs and differentiate the lessons for individual students in relation to the learning process, content and tasks. Lessons are clearly explained. Cross-curricular approaches were usefully employed in a number of classrooms and pupils completed project work to a good standard. Some opportunities are provided for pupils to work in groups and pairs. Building on this good practice, the use of co-operative learning strategies in classrooms should be extended. Where possible consideration should also be given to the use of team-teaching approaches with some class groups and for particular curriculum areas.
- Current curriculum provision for post-primary age pupils requires review. The programme offered should be reconfigured to create further opportunities for pupils to participate in suitable post-primary programmes and where appropriate to achieve certification. In

addition the inclusion of a wider range of practical subjects in the programme offered would contribute significantly to the development of useful vocational and recreational interests and the students' experience of school-life, particularly of the older pupils, would be further enhanced.

- Many pupils have difficulties in the area of language and there is an appropriate focus on the development of their expressive and receptive language particularly in the junior classes. A range of language activities, using story, novels, poetry and rhyme is used purposefully. Direct teaching is also employed in particular areas such as vocabulary development, sight-word recognition, grammar and punctuation. As part of its school self-evaluation process, teachers have identified handwriting as a priority area for development and a range of approaches is used to promote the pupils' handwriting skills. In the pupil questionnaires all pupils responded that they were doing well at reading.
- In Mathematics the teachers endeavour to provide the pupils with opportunities to have positive learning experiences. Concrete and visual materials are used effectively. 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.
- In Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) a broad range of themes and topics is undertaken. The pupils engage purposefully and productively in a variety of thematic projects related to their interests. Seasonal occasions and significant events are employed to promote awareness of time, chronology, change and continuity. Environmental awareness and care is encouraged through the school's garden. Consideration should be given to involvement in the Green School's Initiative.
- The programme in Physical Education (PE) provides for a wide range of activities including swimming, cricket, rugby and football. During the evaluation the pupils were observed to be enjoying and participating beneficially in well-structured PE lessons.
- Commendable attention is given to enabling pupils to express their individuality and creativity through the Visual Arts and high quality samples of their work are on display in classrooms around the school. Pupils enjoy their experience of classroom Music which includes song singing, rhythm work and listening to Music.
- The staff are aware of the importance of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the context of the pupils' particular learning needs. Personal, social and behavioural issues are consistently addressed. Through its cookery programme pupils are enabled to practise and develop life-skills in relation to food preparation, hygiene and safe use of utensils. School assemblies are a regular occurrence and provide opportunities to acknowledge the accomplishments of pupils and to promote positive attitudes, values and habits. To enhance the voice of pupils and to include them in the decision-making process in relation to relevant school matters, consideration should be given to the establishment of a pupils' council.

## **6. Quality of Supports for Pupils**

- The pupils at Benincasa School access a caring and supportive learning environment. Very good collaboration has been established between the teachers, SNAs and other professionals working in the school. Staff at the school are highly committed to meeting the special and often complex behavioural and educational needs of all pupils.

*Published December 2014*

# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

### **Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board of Management welcomes the report on the Whole School Evaluation.

The Board agrees with the findings and is encouraged by the recognition of the commitment and care given to the pupils.

The Board accepts the need to develop an appropriate curriculum for the older – 12+ pupils.

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

- Work will be done to strengthen a strategic plan for the future and trust that the move to more suitable premises will enable this plan.
- Attention will be given to attendance and curriculum for 12+
- A whole school assessment policy will be undertaken.
- While in-school management has been eroded, teaching staff are now meeting weekly to address needs.