

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Whole School Evaluation  
REPORT**

**St Ita's Special School  
Drogheda, Co. Louth  
Uimhir rolla: 18936K**

**Date of inspection: 7 November 2013**



## 1. Introduction

St Ita's Special School, Drogheda is a co-educational special school for learners with a primary diagnosis of a mild general learning disability and a number with a moderate general learning disability. Some learners in the school have other difficulties, such as sensory or physical impairments, alongside their learning disability. The school is under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh. There were 110 learners enrolled at the time of the evaluation and many travel considerable distances to school. A pattern of significant absence from school has been evident among a number of learners during the past two school years. While strategies have been implemented to improve attendance, there is scope for the school to focus further on improving attendance through more specifically targeted interventions. This whole-school evaluation focused on the quality of provision for English, Mathematics and Drama across the school, provision for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for students in the senior classes and provision for Woodwork, Art and Home Economics. 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 commitment and dedication of the board of management, principal, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) to the education and care needs of learners are highly commendable. Learners receive a very good quality educational experience.
- The quality of leadership and management of the school are very good. Leadership is focussed carefully on ensuring high-quality learning for all learners.
- The whole staff manifests a hard work ethic and a deep commitment to learners. The team work of teachers and SNAs is particularly commendable.
- There is very good partnership with the parents' and friends' association.
- The quality of communication among the members of the school community and between the school and the wider community is very good.
- The quality of learner achievement in all subjects evaluated was very good.
- The management of students is very good. The relationships between learners and their teachers and SNAs are highly praiseworthy. The learners' respect for one other is a particular strength of the school.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- There is scope to improve some target setting further in the school's individual education plans (IEPs) by ensuring that all targets are readily measurable and include discrete achievement criteria.
- The school should develop further the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for teaching and learning, particularly through increasing the use of interactive whiteboards, during more lessons.
- To augment the current practices in the assessment of learning, the school should make use of video and photographic records, to contribute to personalised learning records and to support learners' progression to settings beyond school.

### 3. Quality of School Management

- The quality of the work of the board of management is good. The board is commended for its ongoing commitment and work on behalf of the school. The board is constituted appropriately and its meetings take place at regular intervals. Minutes are maintained and school accounts are audited annually. A financial report should be recorded in the minutes of each meeting. The board is commended for its maintenance and development of the school building, the provision of appropriate school resources and its support for the professional development of the staff. A few parents who completed questionnaires as part of the evaluation were unsure as to the voluntary nature of their financial contribution to the operation of the school. The format and text of current school letters and forms about this matter could be misinterpreted and should be revised to ensure that the voluntary nature of such contributions is expressed clearly.
- The quality of the work of the in-school management team is very good. The team consists of the administrative principal, the deputy principal and one teacher with a special duties post. The leadership of the principal is very effective and is characterised by high levels of commitment, earnestness and approachability. The leadership of the two other members is characterised by skill, significant insight and diligence. In support of their roles, availing of leadership courses provided by the Leadership and Planning Programme of the PDST is advised. Engagement in a course of initial mentor training to support new teachers would also be very beneficial. It was evident during the evaluation that distribution of leadership among other staff also takes place. Different staff members undertake a range of duties conscientiously. The school operates very smoothly day-to-day. Commendable action planning facilitates effective school management.
- The quality of the management of resources is very good. The teaching staff brings a wide range of professional experience to its work and a good number of teachers have post-graduate qualifications in special needs education. All SNAs have undertaken training and attended courses relevant to their work. Continuous professional development is supported and promoted assiduously. Classrooms are very well resourced and are well-structured, organised learning environments. Interactive white boards, computers and tablet devices are available in almost all classrooms. Learners' literacy, numeracy, creative work and achievements are prominently celebrated in classroom and corridor displays. While maximum use is made of all the existing accommodation and facilities, the small size of some classrooms is impacting on their use by learners and teachers alike. The outdoor recreational facilities available to learners are now limited, given the growing school community.
- The quality of home-school partnerships is very good. Very clear channels of communication have been established. Parent-teacher meetings are held and informative end-of-year written reports are issued to parents. All of the parents who completed a parental questionnaire, administered as part of the evaluation, were happy with the school, believing that it provides a safe environment for their children and that it is well run. A high percentage of responses confirmed that communication is good between school and home.
- The work of the parents' and friends' association, of which every parent is a member, in support of the school and of the wider family network is highly praiseworthy. At the pre-evaluation meeting, the representatives of the association acknowledged the approachability of the principal, the supportive school staff and the hard-working ethos of staff members as significant school strengths. They reported that teachers are successful in realising the potential of each child. While acknowledging the committed work carried out to date with school leavers, preparation of learners for transfer to the adult work place or to further education settings was an area identified, by the parent representatives, for further development. Among its strategies for improving the attendance of a number of

learners, the school should consider working in collaboration with the parents' and friends' association.

- The quality of the management of learners is very good. Learners are treated with great care and respect. They engage very positively with each other, with their teachers and SNAs. The quality of learner engagement during the evaluation was highly commendable. Students' questionnaire responses indicate that they enjoy very good relationships with their teachers, feel safe in school, believe they are listened to and that they judge their school to be a good school. Challenging and complex behaviours are addressed sensitively and effectively. All parents who completed a questionnaire as part of the evaluation agreed that the school manages challenging behaviours effectively.

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

- The school planning and school self-evaluation processes are commendable. The whole-school planning process has been advanced very successfully. Whole-school curriculum plans take appropriate guidance from the *Primary School Curriculum* and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities. It is commendable that the plans provide clear guidance to teachers in respect of the exact learning objectives to be addressed and the intended progression of content and skills at the various class levels. Policies that support school operation and organisation are well developed.
- Self-evaluation processes have commenced in the school and have focussed on a wide range of organisational and educational areas to support school improvement. A particular focus on one aspect of learning and teaching should be the next step of the process.
- Overall, the quality of teachers' individual planning is good. Long-term planning is closely aligned with the school plan and ensures that learners receive an appropriately broad programme of learning. The inclusion of greater detail in respect of content, topics or themes that are to be addressed will contribute to some planning for English. All teachers maintain comprehensive short-term planning with evidence of monthly reflection on learning outcomes. The quality of some commentary varies in terms of its usefulness to inform future teaching and learning.
- All teachers have been working diligently to develop the individual education planning (IEP) process in the school. Where best practice was evident, learning targets were very specific and measurable and achievement of targets was clearly recorded. There remains scope to improve some target setting further. Some targets are phrased more as broad goals and need to be more measurable, with separately stated success criteria, to more readily confirm achievement of targets and progression. All IEPs focus appropriately on core areas of communication, social skills and behaviour. Consideration might now be given to include explicit targets for independent living skills or for preparation of learners for transfer to the adult work place or to further education settings, in consultation with the senior students.
- 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 Learner Achievement**

- Provision for English and language and communication is effective, with a number of aspects of teaching and learning of a very high quality. The teaching of oral language is

very effective and the development of learners' receptive and expressive language is being achieved very successfully. There is purposeful phonological awareness and social sight vocabulary development through the school. The use of large-format books is successful in supporting early reading experiences. More use of visualisers during reading experiences is recommended. Learners experience a good, broad range of reading material, including differentiated reading books. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is used, along with LÁMH where appropriate, to support the acquisition of communication skills among non-verbal learners. Visual schedules are being used well. All parents who completed a questionnaire felt that the school is helping their children with language and communication. Good progress is in evidence in the development of learners' writing skills and the standard of writing is very good among learners, commensurate with their abilities.

- The quality of teaching, learning and achievement in Mathematics is very good. Lessons evaluated were very stimulating and well organised and learner participation was at a high level. Lesson content was very well pitched and well differentiated in all lessons evaluated. Early mathematical understanding is developed effectively using a range of concrete materials to support graded tasks appropriate to the pupils' needs. Younger pupils demonstrated their understanding of mathematical concepts very clearly. In the middle and senior classes, the functional and social applications of Mathematics are emphasised very well, as they relate to time, money, data gathering and mathematics used in everyday life. Some very effective use of ICT to support learning and conceptual development was seen. Students demonstrate their understanding well. A number of students are following the FETAC Level 3 module and the Junior Certificate programme for Mathematics. Their progress, with the support and supervision of their teachers, is highly commendable.
- The quality of teaching, learning and achievement in Drama is very good. A drama teacher provides very good quality, well-structured experiences to all learners, and to students following FETAC Level 3. Drama lessons across the school were well prepared and stimulating. Learners participated eagerly and demonstrated confidence in the use of techniques. In addition to discrete drama lessons, drama is also used as a methodology across the curriculum, with role play featuring regularly in other subjects. Lessons are well paced and are enhanced by the use of music, props and visual supports.
- The quality of provision for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was very good during lessons observed in the senior school. Lessons evaluated focussed on developing students' understanding of personal safety, promoting their self-esteem, their regard for others and aspects of relationships and sexuality education. Effective teaching was evident. Participative approaches, including role play, were employed very successfully and students' demonstrated their understanding clearly. High percentages of the students who completed a questionnaire indicated that they feel safe in school and that they know what to do if someone is being bullied. The positive climate and the mutually respectful relationships established in the school as a whole also contribute to provision for SPHE.
- The quality of provision for Home Economics, Art and Woodwork is very good and is valuable in facilitating the acquisition of essential life and vocational skills. Lessons observed were very well planned and promoted and achieved very good learner participation. Instructions for learner activity in all subjects were clear. The small kitchen is organised effectively with picture cues that support the pupils' independent work and learning in cookery lessons. The woodwork and art room is small by mainstream post-primary school standards but provides for successful outcomes and satisfaction in learning. Learners demonstrated good understanding of the skills taught to them and recall of new information. Learner portfolios in different art mediums, the examples of craft work and of woodworking seen, demonstrate that a commendable programme is being delivered. A number of students follow the Junior Certificate programme or the FETAC Level 3 module in the various subjects and their achievements are admirable. The provision of a

whiteboard and internet access in the woodwork and art room to enhance demonstration and enable further access to teaching resources is strongly advised. Including particular sections in the health and safety policy on the operation of the woodwork room, given its size, and on the use of kitchen utensils during cookery would also be beneficial.

- The quality of overall teaching, learning and learner achievement is very good, with few areas for improvement. Very good practice was observed in respect of sharing objectives with the learners. The teachers and SNAs work carefully together to create a positive holistic learning environment in which the learners can participate actively. Among the few areas requiring attention is the use of ICT for teaching and learning, where there is scope to have increased use of interactive whiteboards by both learners and teachers during more lessons. A very high percentage of the students who completed a questionnaire confirmed that their teachers talk to them about how to do better at their work. Learners' involvement in both the Junior Certificate and FETAC Level 3 module in different subjects is planned appropriately according to their individual needs and abilities.
- Current overall assessment practice is commendable. Teachers maintain comprehensive assessment documentation that monitors and records learners' progress in learning. A range of formative and summative assessment practices were in evidence in the various settings visited. Good use of video to support assessment for learning was noted. Going forward, there is scope to augment practice in the school's assessment for learning, through the use of video and photographic records, particularly to contribute to personalised learning records and to contribute to supporting the progression of students to placements or the workplace when they leave school.

## **6. Quality of Support for Learners**

- The commitment of management and staff to the provision of appropriate education for the learners and their efforts to maximise the participation of every learner in the full life of the school are highly commendable. Teachers and SNAs work in partnership very successfully in supporting learners' full access to school life. The contribution of the SNAs to addressing the care needs and wellbeing of learners is worthy of particular commendation. Almost all of the students who completed questionnaires reported that they could talk to a teacher if they are upset about anything at school.
- Three teachers are deployed in a support capacity and the quality of provision is very commendable. They provide support to learners through station teaching, engaging in team teaching and by withdrawal of individuals and small groups to focus on identified learning needs. Learning programmes are planned in collaboration with the class teachers. Interactions observed in the learner-friendly supplementary teaching settings were very affirming and encouraging. Commendable teaching approaches and interventions are evident. Learning outcomes are very good.
- The quality of pastoral care is very good in this school. A familial learning environment is nurtured carefully. The overall climate is very positive and learner-friendly, and learners' talents and endeavours are celebrated at every opportunity. The learners are facilitated to partake in a very wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. These include sporting activities with local schools, school trips, the *Green-Schools* and *Active Schools* programmes, horse riding, horticulture, swimming and creative activities with a local artist. Very good links are established with local business in support of the senior students' work experience programme. The school has a number of learners of different nationalities and whose families are international. Accordingly, further celebration of the intercultural nature of the learner population is advised.

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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**

The Board of Management of St. Ita's Special School welcomes the Whole School Evaluation report.

We are pleased that the report recognises and endorses the commitment and dedication of the staff of our school to the educational and care needs of the learners. We endorse that our education provision occurs in a school that was defined as familial in nature.

We further endorse the finding that the staff are deeply committed to the learners and that the leadership of the school is focussed on high quality learning.

We also affirm the finding that the relationships between the learners and teachers and SNAs is of a high level and that the learners also respect each other.

We are affirmed in our future endeavours by the acknowledgement of the strengths as outlined in the report and have also been greatly encouraged and motivated by the positive comments received during the WSE process from both students and parents.

## **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 of Management and staff welcome the recommendations provided in the report and have taken steps to ensure their implementation in current and future school planning and self-evaluation.

- IEP training has been secured for March 2014 and this will be disseminated to the staff following the training. Progress has already been made in the development of IEP targets through staff consultations.
- Training on further use of the Interactive White Boards has already taken place and the increased use is highlighted in teacher planning.
- The Woodwork/Art room now has its own ICT capability and Wi-Fi connectivity has been installed.
- A new server has been put in place to allow higher and faster levels of access for teachers. This will include discrete areas for recording of 'video' evidence to help with personalised learning records.
- Parents will be made more clearly aware of the scope and nature of the voluntary contribution.
- Initial mentoring training has been secured and will take place in March 2014. This will lead to even greater levels of teaching methodologies to be shared.
- St Ita's has joined with the WALK Programme to assist in the preparation of learners to transfer to the work place and new in-school programme is being designed to assist with this transfer and assist with independent living skills.
- Teachers will meet with the school literacy and numeracy team and school management to benchmark/standardise detail, reflection and commentary on all short term plans.