Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Ultan’s Special School,
Flowerhill,
Navan, Co. Meath
Uimhir rolla: 19216E

Date of inspection: 12 December 2012
1. Introduction

St Ultan’s Special School was established as a co-educational special school for students with a mild general learning disability. The school’s enrolment criteria have altered in the recent past to facilitate enrolment of some students with a general learning disability in the moderate range. A number of the school’s students have additional difficulties, including some with physical disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders. St Ultan’s Special School is located in Navan town but serves students from a range of urban and rural backgrounds. Many students travel considerable distances to school, from county Meath and also from Dublin City and County and from county Cavan. Average attendance of the 116 students enrolled is generally good, while a minority had relatively high absence patterns during the past school year. Formal analysis of the causes should take place and the partners in the school community should work collaboratively to address this challenge. In addition to the Primary School Curriculum, the school provides a range of subjects of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) modules. The whole-school evaluation focused on the quality of provision for English, Mathematics, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education. 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 principal, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) towards the students’ education and care was very clearly evident during the evaluation. A comprehensive educational experience is being delivered.

- Students consistently demonstrate very positive attitudes towards their learning. Participation and enjoyment levels during all lessons evaluated were high.

- The complex school environment is managed efficiently and its day-to-day operation functions very smoothly.

- The overall quality of teaching, learning and student achievement is very good. Provision for English, Mathematics, SPHE and Physical Education was of a highly commendable standard during the evaluation.

- Provision for learning in Home Economics and Woodwork is very good.

- The quality of additional supports for students and the work of the special needs assistants in supporting students’ full access to education are very good.

- The quality of the management of students is very good. Assiduous attention is paid to the needs of students in the daily life of the school.

The following main recommendations are made:

- There is scope to achieve greater consistency in the design of the school’s individual education plans (IEPs) and for the very good practice found in a number of plans to inform common practice across the school.
• While all IEPs contain targets for students’ social skills there is scope to include explicit targets for independent living skills.
• Criteria should be prepared to guide the school in the selection of students for participation in certificate programmes.

3. Quality of School Management

• The school has a committed board of management which supports the administration of the school effectively and which is appreciative of the dedication of the staff. The board is constituted appropriately and meets regularly. Minutes of its meetings show that the board has experienced members who are well informed about and proactively engage in addressing issues to support the school’s functioning.

• The commitment of the in-school management team to the effective operation of the school was clearly in evidence during the evaluation. The school is a complex environment to organise on a daily basis and during the evaluation it was observed to function very smoothly. A very high percentage of parents who completed a questionnaire as part of the evaluation agreed that the school is well run. The principal is conscientious and is focussed on developing the school to meet the needs of the students. She has a commendable, visible presence in the daily life of the school and takes duty during all recreation breaks. The principal is supported by a capable, knowledgeable and willing in-school management team. The roles assigned to the members are clear and very relevant to the needs of the school. Duties are agreed collaboratively and reviewed as required. Minutes are maintained of in-school management team meetings. It would be profitable for minutes to note formally all decisions taken and to record which member will lead the implementation of any resulting measures.

• The quality of the management of resources is very good. Classrooms are well resourced and students’ work and achievements are prominently celebrated in school displays. The school is located on a limited site, with much of the accommodation in prefabricated classrooms, but good use is made of the existing accommodation and facilities. The school environment is maintained very well, with educational displays appropriate to students’ needs. The board is engaging with the school patron and with the Department to address the school’s permanent accommodation needs.

• Of particular benefit to the school is the collegiality evident among the staff members. Very good levels of continuity in the school among teachers and SNAs have facilitated much engagement in relevant post-graduate study in special needs education and retention of expertise in the school. Most of the teachers have obtained or are studying for postgraduate qualifications in special education.

• Links between the school and the home have been developed well. Informative parent–teacher meetings are held and comprehensive formal reports sent home twice annually. A home-school communication diary is in operation and is working effectively. A high percentage of parents who completed a questionnaire expressed their satisfaction with the work of the school. A parents’ association is not currently in place and the establishment of a parents’ association affiliated to the National Parents’ Council (NPC) would be of value to the school community. The board of management should consider ways of supporting parents to form a parents’ association taking into account the wide geographical catchment area of the school.
The quality of the management of students is very good. The attention paid to developing students’ individual needs is highly commendable. Almost all students who completed a questionnaire stated that they get on well with their fellow students. All students who completed a questionnaire stated that they feel safe and cared for in school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

The quality of whole-school planning is commendable. The school’s administrative policies provide clear guidance for the work of the school and they align with legislative requirements and department circulars. The school’s curricular policy documents are comprehensive and well-detailed. Curriculum plans outline statements to ensure sufficient breadth in subjects. They also identify teaching approaches and strategies to support curriculum delivery. When reviewing plans there is potential to make decisions about adapting whole school plans further to fit the needs of the specific classes in the school. Identifying where the elements of the Primary School Curriculum are present in JCSP provision and FETAC modules and matching them to the different class levels will help further in supporting progression. LÁMH is used beneficially in classrooms. Further detail on how LÁMH is used should be included in the whole-school plan for communication and literacy to support consistency in its use as students progress through the school. The school self-evaluation process has begun and it is commendable practice that the school is using questionnaires to gather evidence about the work of the school and the efficacy of learning programmes.

The implementation and impact of school planning and self-evaluation is commendable. Teachers prepare clear short-term plans to support delivery in different subjects. The quality of teachers’ long-term planning is commendable. In accordance with school policy, individual education plans are prepared for all students. The individual education plan (IEP) process should continue to be developed, to ensure that common practice across the school is based upon the very good practices identified during the evaluation. Where best practice was evident learning targets were very specific and measurable and achievement of targets was clearly recorded. In some others, targets need to be more measurable, the amount of targets should align with the number of priority needs of students and some IEPs lacked the necessary detail to show achievement of targets and progression. All IEPs focus well on long term goals in regard to communication, social skills and behaviour but there is scope to include explicit targets for independent living skills.

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

The quality of teaching, learning and student achievement in English is very good. The language lessons observed during the evaluation were highly participative and students’ receptive and expressive language is developed effectively across all classes. Students’ oral presentation skills are well developed. A school-wide emphasis on developing students’ phonological awareness and phonemic awareness is strongly in evidence. Very good work is done in reading with lessons well-pitched, structured and paced. Good work is done on developing students’ sight vocabulary. Students have learned to use a range of reading cues, including phonic skills and contextual clues, and many read orally and silently with very satisfactory levels of understanding. Pupils are provided with
opportunities to write in a variety of genres and copybook work is well monitored. In order to build further on the very good activity, exploration of more writing genres is advised.

- The quality of teaching, learning and student achievement in Mathematics is very good. Stimulating and well-organised lessons were evaluated in which participation by students was at a high level. Lessons observed were very well-pitched and well-differentiated, while in a small number pair work might be used more. Very good quality discussion and explicit teaching of mathematical language characterise lessons. Much use is made of appropriate physical materials as well as effective pictorial representations to explain concepts clearly. Students have frequent opportunities to manipulate resources and use them to demonstrate understanding. The explanation of concepts is linked very beneficially to the students’ life experiences and the environment, enabling understanding of concepts to be developed effectively through authentic contexts. Understanding of number facts and key concepts is well developed and very good standards in learning were evident across the school. Written work is completed neatly in copybooks and monitored and corrected carefully.

- The quality of provision for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is very good. Effective teaching was evident during lessons. Circle-time activities focus very well on developing students’ sense of their own identity, their awareness and appreciation of their peers, staff and others and understanding of personal safety. In a broader sense SPHE is woven very carefully into the atmosphere of the school and a very strong pastoral care dimension to the work of the school is evident. Staff prioritises the building and nurturing of the self-esteem of students. Fine-quality learning activities that relate very appropriately to the needs of students’ lives are implemented across the school.

- The quality of provision for Physical Education is very good. A wide range of high-quality activities is undertaken, including valuable activity in aquatics, dance and complementary activity such as aerobics. Lessons evaluated were very well organised and structured with students engaging enthusiastically and ably in a range of movement activities and games. Teachers teach skills very capably using very clear instructions. They pay very good attention to ensuring the inclusion of students who are reluctant to participate in games and activities.

- The breadth and depth of students’ learning is supported by very effective provision for Home Economics and for Woodwork that aids students to acquire and practise essential life and vocational skills. Teaching is very child centred. Active participation is strongly emphasised in well-organised lessons that focus strongly on developing authentic and applicable skills. Students were highly engaged during lessons observed in these subjects and students’ positive attitudes to their learning were commendable.

- The quality of overall teaching, learning and student achievement is very good. The quality of student participation during lessons evaluated in the whole-school evaluation was excellent. All students who completed a questionnaire stated that they liked their lessons and learning.

- A good, broad range of assessment tools is used in the school. Assessment findings are recorded clearly and shared with parents. Detailed monthly progress reports are compiled to record the classroom work completed. Portfolio assessment is a key feature of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and modules accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).
6. Quality of Support for Students

- The quality of students’ access to, and their participation in, the full life of the school is very good. There is a high level of collaboration between teachers and SNAs. In all lessons and all settings during the evaluation teachers and SNAs worked in partnership very well. Sensitive care is provided in meeting the care-needs of pupils and in enabling students to access the curriculum. Teachers and SNAs are aware of the importance of promoting students’ independence at school.

- One teacher is deployed in a support capacity, working both in classrooms and with small groups withdrawn from their classrooms, and is focussing on agreed school priorities. Currently the teacher primarily implements learning and teaching programmes related to the aesthetic and creative development of students. This is working very well. Teaching is purposeful and students’ engagement is very good. A very good language development focus was observed during lessons. Programmes are constructively planned and monitored in collaboration with the class teachers.

- During the evaluation reservations of different types were expressed, by the principal, members of the in-school management team and some teachers, about certain aspects of certification programmes: aspects regarding structure and challenge, potential duplication with modules provided in training environments after students leave school and applicability to the needs of less able students. The school should prepare criteria to guide the selection of students for participation in certificate programmes.

- Many students travel significant distances to school. The school sensitively and commendably provides a breakfast to students who leave their home early and who may require additional nourishment prior to the commencement of the school day. A hot lunch is offered each day to students.

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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. Ultan’s Special School welcomes the Whole School Evaluation report and thanks the Inspectors involved for the courteous and professional manner in which they engaged with the Board, staff and pupils during their inspection. We are pleased that the report recognises and endorses the commitment and dedication of the staff of our school to the provision of a high quality educational experience for pupils with special educational needs in a positive, caring and supportive school environment. 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.

At the time of the WSE, research and review into the IEP process in the school had already commenced with the view to developing and consolidating our current practices and procedures. The advice contained in the WSE report has been included in this review and teachers have already engaged in self-evaluation and professional development with the objective of enhancing and expanding upon existing good practice.

The In-school Management Team are currently examining the recent developments in relation to certification programmes, particularly in relation to the Junior Certificate programme, and their applicability and relevance to the students of this school. Based on the conclusions and decisions of this process, all criteria used in the selection of students participating in certification programmes in the school will be reviewed.

Following on the advice with regard to writing genres, two members of staff have undertaken professional development in the First Steps programme, disseminated information to teachers who have already begun to introduce new approaches to writing in their classrooms.