

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Ballyowen Meadows,
Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin
Uimhir rolla: 19355S

Date of inspection: 12 November 2010



1. Introduction

Ballyowen Meadows is a special school for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) of primary school age. The school operates under the patronage of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and receives support services from Beechpark Services, including psychology, behavioural support, occupational therapy, speech & language therapy and social work. There were thirty two pupils enrolled at the time of this evaluation. With the development of the outreach classes for pupils with ASD in the greater Dublin area, there has been an increase in the profile of pupils with complex needs attending the school. Most pupils avail of school transport funded by the Department of Education and Skills. The newly appointed principal took up the position at the beginning of the 2010/11 school year.

Pending construction of new school facilities, the school is temporarily located in a primary school building in Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin. Due in 2014, the new school building will be located on the same campus in Stillorgan as Setanta Special NS (post-primary school for pupils with ASD). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The principal provides clear and effective leadership and good teamwork was in evidence as the school continues to develop its educational provision for pupils with ASD.
- The highly experienced board of management carefully attends to its duties and responsibilities and is committed to the ongoing development of the school.
- The in-school management team, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and ancillary staff work conscientiously on behalf of the pupils and demonstrate high levels of commitment in their work.
- The majority of staff have undertaken professional development courses relevant to the needs of the pupils with ASD.
- The school has developed positive links with local mainstream schools to support opportunities for inclusion of pupils.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- The work commenced in the review and formation of school policies should be continued until all key policies and procedures are ratified by the board of management and implemented across the school.
- Whole school approaches to classroom planning should be implemented to support the continuity, cohesion and differentiation of curriculum provision in all classes.
- Opportunities for co-operative teaching should be extended across the school in order to support collaborative practice and skill development.
- An audit of training needs should be undertaken to determine the current and future needs of the staff. Professional development opportunities should be accessed through the Special Education Support Service and the colleges of education.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is properly constituted with experienced members. The board meets regularly, maintains records, manages finances, and conscientiously attends to its responsibilities. A key concern of the board is to progress the new school building project. The members of the board of management are commended for their ongoing support for the development of the school. The school parents' association has also been active over a number of years in supporting the work of the school.
- The newly appointed principal demonstrates very effective and committed leadership. She adopts a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to the management of the school. She promotes a collegial working environment for staff, and supports co-operative approaches to addressing the needs of the pupils and the school. The in-school management team has been reduced by recent staff changes. The acting deputy works in support of the principal and the experienced staff team willingly contribute to the orderly running of the school.
- The board of management supports the continuous professional development (CPD) of staff and the school is conscious of the importance of CPD in its work with pupils with ASD. The seven classroom teachers have a range of professional experience and a number have post-graduate training in the areas of special education and autism. Many of the sixteen full-time special needs assistants have also undertaken training and have attended courses relevant to their work. It is recommended that the school continue to liaise with the Special Education Support Service and other CPD providers in relation to ongoing professional development needs.
- An important contribution to the work of the school is made by the two part-time teachers for Physical Education and Music. The work of the school is also supported very effectively by the administrative and caretaking services.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The school has identified a number of key areas for development and review. Policy revision and formation, and related staff training have been prioritised. The principal and senior teachers, in consultation with the board of management, have been proactive in undertaking a comprehensive review of school policies. The good work commenced in the formation and review of policies should be continued in order to ensure that appropriate policies and programmes in key areas are ratified by the board and implemented across the school.
- Careful long and short term classroom planning is undertaken by individual teachers to cater for the specific needs of pupils in their classrooms. It is recommended that whole-school approaches to classroom planning should be devised to support the continuity, cohesion and differentiation of curriculum provision from junior to senior classrooms.
- A revised Individual Education Plan (IEP) template has been devised and a collaborative IEP process is in place. Consultation and co-operation with parents and members of the clinical team are an essential part of this process. Consideration should now be given to reviewing how each pupil's IEP is implemented and how progress on identified targets is tracked in the classroom context.

Child protection policy and procedures

Child protection policy and procedures were being reviewed and updated at the time of this evaluation. On completion of the review the school authorities provided evidence, that in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management had formally adopted the Department's *Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools*. Evidence was provided to show that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The staff has succeeded in creating classroom environments that are supportive for pupils with ASD with clearly defined visual boundaries around individual work areas and group locations. Effective use is made of work stations, visual timetables, schedules and structures. Staff use a variety of strategies, suited to the learning needs of pupils with autism. Staff members have undertaken training in a variety of methodologies, including TEACCH, PECS and ABA. Across the curriculum a wide variety of commercially produced and individually made resources are usefully employed to engage the pupils in learning activities and tasks suited to their needs and interests. Staff regularly observe and record the progress of the pupils in their schoolwork and behaviour. Further development of whole-school policy, employing a continuum of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment approaches would strengthen processes for tracking and monitoring pupil progress.
- In the area of language and communication, pupils are encouraged to engage in regular language lessons on age appropriate topics frequently using visual referents to support participation. Important collaborative work is undertaken with the speech and language therapists in this area. A good emphasis is placed on reading readiness activities including acquiring knowledge of print conventions, basic sight vocabulary, phonic awareness and word recognition strategies. Literacy tasks are generally delivered on an individual basis during workstation time, and reinforced through group and whole class activities in the other curriculum areas.
- In Mathematics concrete equipment and visual materials are widely and purposefully employed. Teachers are conscious of the range of learning needs in the classroom and activities are individualised to meet the needs of pupils. In a number of classrooms, concepts are usefully related to aspects of the pupils' environment to promote functional mathematics and the consolidation of skills.
- In the area of Social Environmental and Scientific Education interesting topics are explored with due attention given to active learning methodologies. Opportunities are also taken to access community resources and amenities through class outings and visits. The cross-curricular approach employed in this area facilitates further promotion of the pupils' language and literacy. The work undertaken on the revised whole school policy should provide for the continuity, progression and differentiation of the curriculum across the school.
- Staff are aware of the importance of Social Personal and Health Education in the context of the particular learning needs of the pupils. Where appropriate, specific programmes are implemented to develop pupils' tolerance levels for stress inducing situations. A commendable practice of rewarding positive on-task behaviour with regular reinforcement during activities was observed. Teachers and SNAs endeavour to foster positive attitudes, values and habits and good use is made of social stories. The

promotion of the personal, social and independence skills of the pupils is encouraged throughout the school day.

- The learning experiences undertaken in the Visual Arts, Music and Drama provide pupils with important opportunities for participation in creative activities and self-expression. Active and purposeful involvement of the pupils in these areas and the use of school wide themes for Drama is successfully employed in classrooms. The programme provided in Physical Education is carefully structured and the pupils participation is skilfully supported, with due attention to the social dimension of the programme. Pupils also access activities such as swimming and horse-riding during the course of the school year.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- Ballyowen Meadows School staff in collaboration with the clinical services team endeavour to create an environment where pupils are secure, respected and enabled to participate successfully in the learning programme provided. A collaborative system of individualised education planning, involving school staff, clinical team members and parents has been established. A range of programmes has been developed to address the learning needs of pupils with ASD and a variety of resources and facilities has been put in place to support the pupils' programmes. Effective practice and purposeful pupil engagement were observed in classrooms. Protocols have been established for regular contact between home and school. The school is committed to the ongoing development of its policies, programmes and resources to meet the needs of pupils with autism.