

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Michael's House Special National School,
Foxfield,
Briarfield Villas, Greendale Road,
Kilbarrack, Dublin 5
Uimhir rolla: 20279M

Date of inspection: 18 October 2012



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

1. Introduction

St Michael's House Special National School, Foxfield, is a co-educational special school under the patronage of St. Michael's House, a non-denominational voluntary body providing facilities and services to people with learning disabilities in Dublin City and County. The school was established in 2008 to provide education for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and a moderate general learning disability. Since its establishment, however, the school has also enrolled students with autistic spectrum disorders and a severe/profound general learning disability, and now includes a significant percentage of students with severe/profound general learning disabilities. During the whole-school evaluation it was evident that the combined needs of the overall population are complex and the provision of education is a demanding challenge for school management and staff. The school has a favourable staffing allocation of nine teachers, including the administrative principal, and twenty four special needs assistants (SNAs). Average attendance of the 35 students enrolled is generally good, while a minority had relatively high absence patterns during the past school year. The whole-school evaluation focused on the quality of provision for Language and Communication, Mathematics and students' scientific and environmental education experiences. 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 principal, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) demonstrate admirable care and commitment towards the students and openness to engage in school improvement.
- A collegial, supportive atmosphere among staff members is evident in the school.
- During the evaluation the staff engaged with the students in a very positive, respectful and supportive manner.
- The school seeks to promote home-school connections in positive, constructive ways.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- The board of management should formulate a strategic plan for the future development of the school. To this end the identification of whole-school priorities, the implementation of an action planning approach to address curriculum and organisational objectives and the development of systems to monitor the implementation and impact of all plans and policies cyclically are recommended.
- The focus and operation of the in-school management team require significant change and development with a clear emphasis on both instructional and distributed leadership.
- The school's individual education plans (IEPs) for students need significant development in line with best practice and should comprehensively address the specific individual needs of the students.
- Agreed clear protocols should be put in place to facilitate the efficient day-to-day operation of the school.

- There is a need for cohesion and clarity in all whole-school curriculum plans to guide teachers in ensuring appropriate continuity, progression and depth of learning across the curriculum.
- A whole-school assessment approach should be developed and used systematically.
- Further on-site professional development opportunities, to include the management of challenging behaviour, should be considered.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is constituted appropriately and meets regularly. In recent years its role has focused on the refurbishment of, and move into, the school building. During the pre-evaluation meeting board members outlined that the board has only relatively recently begun to play a role in policy development. It is now timely that the board adopts a more proactive approach to the development of agreed whole-school plans, administrative policies and organisational protocols. In this regard, the role of the chairperson of the board of management in liaising with in-school management will be crucial. The implementation of all plans, protocols and policies should be regularly monitored and reviewed on a cyclical basis by the staff and the board.
- The focus and operation of in-school management require significant change and development. The team consists of the administrative principal, acting deputy principal and two teachers with special duties posts. During the evaluation the commitment of the principal and the team to the welfare of students and staff was demonstrable. However, there is a clear need for the principal to focus more on her instructional leadership role to guide the development of students' educational experiences and their achievement. Greater distribution of leadership among teachers who hold posts of responsibility and indeed other teachers is recommended. This will facilitate the agreement, implementation and monitoring of school priorities and protocols. In-school management team meetings should be scheduled to identify and formally address priority matters.
- Improvement is required in relation to the management of resources. A devolved capital funding project has provided refurbished accommodation that is generally clean and suited in part to its purpose. However, it was very evident during the evaluation that the acoustic and sensory profiles of the building are not appropriate to the needs of students with autistic spectrum disorders. Addressing the educational and behaviour management areas requiring improvement in the school requires concomitant improvement in the environment, the current limitations of which are impacting negatively on student learning. The board should engage with the Department to address this issue. There is scope to develop the educational displays in classrooms and the school generally. A good range of materials and resources, including interactive whiteboards and teacher-prepared resources, is available to support teaching and learning. There is scope to further develop the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a teaching and learning tool.
- Staff members demonstrated commendable commitment to the students and a keen awareness of the depth of students' needs. However, during interviews with the principal, other members of the in-school management team and SNAs, concerns were raised about overall staff welfare. To address concerns raised regarding incidences of challenging behaviour, analysis of the antecedent causes of incidences and follow up procedures should happen frequently and formally. There is a specific challenge for

school management in relation to the induction of teachers and SNAs. To support the whole-staff operation an induction resource and protocol should be prepared for substitute teachers and substitute SNAs. Strong consideration should be given to hosting more frequent continuing professional development activities in the school building so that as many as possible, including parents and regularly-employed substitute staff, could benefit, if feasible. School policy on staff injury requires expansion. A detailed protocol is required to guide all staff in the event of injury, with clearly-outlined steps for support and recovery, and also to set out staff members' own responsibilities.

- The profile of the families, with many families being newcomer families, and the distances from the school that many students travel, pose challenges in respect of developing home-school communication. A home-school communication diary is in operation which is reported to be useful. All parents who submitted questionnaires to the evaluation team agreed that the school is welcoming of parents. Most parents in questionnaire responses agreed that they are happy with the school and that there is good communication with the home. At the pre-evaluation meeting, the representatives of the parents' association acknowledged clearly the commitment and enthusiasm of the principal and staff but expressed reservations about the overall quality of education received by the students.
- Relationships between staff and students are good and respect for students was evident during the evaluation: most parents in questionnaire responses stated that their child likes school. There is scope for development in relation to aspects of how students are managed, however. Behaviour plans should be linked formally with the school's IEPs. A review of the code of behaviour should provide further guidance regarding assessing intention on the part of the students when incidences of challenging behaviours occur. During the evaluation evidence was found of SNAs being left in sole charge of classes during teacher absences from the school. This should not happen and arrangements must be put in place to ensure supervision in classes is in accordance with Department regulations outlined in circular SPED 07/02.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The implementation and impact of school planning and self-evaluation is currently limited and the whole-school development planning process requires considerable improvement. It was acknowledged during the evaluation that a whole-school planning process only began in earnest in the last year. Some of the plans prepared require review. The admissions and enrolment policy provides for the deferral of enrolment of students with special educational needs. This element of the policy requires immediate amendment to ensure the policy's adherence to legislation. The enrolment policy also needs to be reviewed to reflect the range of disabilities among the school population. Some whole-school curriculum plans are not rooted sufficiently in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities. There is insufficient detail in the plans to clearly guide classroom practice and to exemplify expected progression in learning. Whole-school curriculum plans for a number of other curriculum areas have not yet been produced. A strategic plan for the development and review of curricular plans and administrative policies should be prepared. The development of these processes should complement and support the school in self-evaluation practices.
- During the whole-school evaluation all teachers provided a bi-monthly long-term plan and short-term plans that made reference to the NCCA *Guidelines for teachers of students with moderate general learning disabilities*. Teachers' understanding of the importance of covering the strands was evident from classroom planning. However, there is immediate need for improvement in the individualised planning process for students. Many of the school's IEPs do not provide for satisfactory depth, breadth and clarity in relation to

students' learning experiences, when students' observable abilities are considered. IEPs are currently prepared for too long a duration to impact constructively on students' learning and development. Recording of progress was conducted appropriately and regularly in some cases but in others, there was a lack of the detail necessary to describe progress. Going forward it should be ensured that a student's IEP is the key guiding daily operating plan in respect of meeting priority needs. Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed targets, that are based on well-interrogated baseline assessment data and previous targets, should be outlined for implementation in incremental steps. IEP development should be led by teachers and include formal contributions from those who work closely with the students. IEPs should be prepared in line with guidance from the National Council for Special Education and the Department of Education and Skills, reviewed during the course of the term for implementation, and targets adjusted as necessary. More frequent IEP review meetings are necessary to strengthen links and communication with parents.

- 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 pupil achievement in language and communication is good in some respects but demonstrates scope for improvement in others. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and LÁMH are used to support the acquisition of communication skills among non-verbal students. Visual schedules are used well and many students demonstrated good communication through the use of PECS. It was reported during the meeting with the SNAs that there is need for school-wide consistency in the use of symbols. While use of daily news and circle time type activities was noted in some settings they were underused generally and should be expanded. Ways in which the quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in language and communication can be improved include augmenting PECS with other communication modes such as electronic choice switches and other assistive technology which can profitably aid students in conceptualising language and encourage the communicative process. Students' experience in reading, in its broadest sense as engagement with language other than spoken language, generally takes the form of engagement with PECS. While some provision is made for introducing students to big picture books, overall this situation is not satisfactory and much more could be achieved in this area. Classrooms should provide exposure to print that is relevant to the lives of students. Well-graded Big Books should be used. Students should frequently hear stories about others and experience stories and books that document their own lives. Students experience some pre-writing and early writing activities and *Handwriting Without Tears* is being used.
- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in mathematics lessons observed during the evaluation varied. Broadly, good focus is placed on developing students' understanding of number. In some settings developing understanding of money, time, shape and space is occurring both formally and informally. Students engage in matching, sorting and classifying objects through well-guided station work. The use of visual timetables is successful in developing students' understanding of time and sequencing and sequencing of activity within the day. Where practice was less successful there was clear need for baseline assessment data to be used to ensure lessons were appropriately challenging, in line with students' needs. The enhancement of mathematical-rich environments within the school would help to consolidate learning.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in scientific and environmental educational experiences has scope for development. Use of multi-sensory resources in the school is providing opportunities to explore the properties of light, to learn through listening and to explore the world through touch and smell. Lessons included opportunities for manipulation of materials. Evidence was found of preparation of some resources that linked with communication and development of an environmental awareness. Good attention is paid in general to developing a sense of self, a sense of others and a consciousness of living things. A broader range of rich experiences should now be achieved through use of the NCCA guidelines in this area. Walks in the immediate school environment provide valid means through which students can explore their community and surroundings. However, learning opportunities during such activity were observed to be incidental in nature only. Clear targets should be planned and incremental learning steps need to be identified for this activity and clearly documented.
- There is variation present in the quality of teaching overall and there is scope for development in respect of learning and student achievement. Classroom environments are prepared in line with the needs of students with autistic spectrum disorders. Visual timetables, workstations and autism-specific approaches are being used beneficially to support students. Where the most effective practices were observed during the evaluation, activities were child-centred, well planned and sequenced and provided for the social needs of the student alongside their peers. Good cognisance is taken of the importance of station work for consolidating learning and practice of skills. There is need for work at stations to be linked more with newly-taught concepts at the teacher table to support progression in learning. Overall there is scope for educational needs to be met through more balancing of individual teaching and scaffolded small group active learning. Some good use of physical and ICT resources was observed but the potential of ICT and of interactive whiteboards, in particular to stimulate learning for students with ASD, is not being realised fully.
- The quality of assessment requires significant improvement. A policy document on assessment makes reference to the potential of a range of worthwhile assessment tools for students on the autistic spectrum to provide a comprehensive information base. However, teachers report that direct observation and checklist records are the only approaches in common use, with teachers noting they have been seeking to identify what tools to use. There is inconsistent use of available assessment data in planning for IEPs. A whole-school framework should be developed that outlines the assessment tools that will be used in practical school operation.

6. Quality of Support for Students

- The care of the principal, teachers and special needs assistants towards the students, as observed during the evaluation, is commended. Two students with particularly complex needs who require more individual attention and care are taught in one-to-one tuition settings. Many students have particular needs around feeding and toileting. The team of SNAs plays an important role in meeting a variety of care needs of students and is involved in supervision and in the preparation of materials in supporting students' access to school life.
- The school benefits from the support of a multi-disciplinary team from St Michael's House which provides additional services to the staff and students. The board of management and staff are very appreciative of the contribution made by the multi-disciplinary team to the education service provided in the school. School management should engage with the patron to seek to maximise this input.

- Parents are invited and supported to become involved in the life of the school through a range of celebrations during the year. The school has a multi-cultural population where different languages are experienced in the home. The *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School* should be consulted to ensure that the intercultural nature of the student population is suitably acknowledged and celebrated.

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 Foxfield School accepts the main recommendations of the report and is in the process of responding to them as outlined below.

The Board notes the generally very positive responses of the 29 families who responded to the anonymous questionnaire sent to them by the evaluation team. As well as stating that they were happy with the school and that there is good communication, over 80% of respondents agreed that education is good in the school and that the work their child is asked to do is matched to their ability.

The Board strongly believes that there is significant good practice in teaching and learning and complementary supports for students in the school and regrets that this was not sufficiently highlighted in the report.

The Board believes that approaches to the education of children with autism and intellectual disability, in particular, PECs and TEACCH are used appropriately and effectively to support the specific individual and group learning needs students in the school. The Board is disappointed that the report does not acknowledge this.

The school, supported by the patron body, has organised and delivered significant training for staff in the understanding and management of challenging behaviour. Staff are fully trained in the use of CALMS (4 days in 2010, 1 day in 2011, 1 day in 2012). CALMS is recognised by the Special Education Support Service as an effective framework for understanding and managing challenging behaviour. The Board is disappointed that the report does not acknowledge this training or note the significant implementation of good practice strategies in the management of challenging behaviour that exist in the school.

The Board notes the report's recommendation in relation to developing protocols in relation to staff injury. The school currently implements the policies and procedures of St. Michael's House in relation to the prevention, reporting and management of any staff injuries. These policies have been developed by the organisation in line with best practice and with professional support from the health and safety function of St. Michael's House and are reviewed regularly.

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 has formulated a strategic plan for the future development of the school with a focus on whole school priorities, implementation and review. Work on the implementation of the plan has commenced. A system is being put in place to include family members in the development and review of policies.

The in-school management team has re-focused the way it works. Each member of the team is chairing a subgroup of the teaching staff. Each subgroup is working on the development of an aspect of curricular approaches.

As part of the development of assessment, the school team has selected a specific assessment tool for use in the school. Assessments using this tool will start next term.

The school has consulted with external education experts regarding the format and implementation of IEPs. The recommended changes have been made to the format and a system is being developed to ensure appropriate use and review of IEPs.