

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

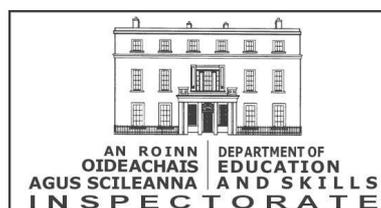
Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saplings Special School for Students with Autism
and Complex Needs
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16

Roll Number: 20372C

Date of inspection: 8 May 2015



Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Saplins Special School, Rathfarnham, in May 2015. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the school, interaction with pupils and review of their work, meetings with the principal and with board of management and parents' representatives, completed parents' questionnaires and a selection of school documents. 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.

Saplins School is a co-educational special school under the patronage of Saplins Schools Ltd. The school provides for pupils with a primary diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and complex needs. Through a number of service providers, including Beechpark Services, the Health Service Executive (HSE) provides speech and language, and occupational therapy services to some of the pupils. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) also provides services to the school on a request or referral basis. The parents' association (PA) funds a part-time occupational therapist. At the time of this evaluation there were twenty-two pupils enrolled and attendance was very good. The school is accommodated in a rented period building on the grounds of a mainstream school. There are five teachers, including the principal, a behaviour analyst and eighteen special needs assistants (SNAs). In 2011 the school was granted temporary recognition by the Department of Education and Skills and is now seeking permanent recognition.

The school has **strengths** in the following areas:

- The board of management has contributed significantly to the management and development of the school over several years.
- The open style of leadership of the acting principal and senior staff facilitates communication and effective collaboration among staff members, contributing to the delivery of a high-quality service to pupils.
- The highly committed and conscientious staff team demonstrates high levels of co-operation in relation to the care, management and support of the pupils.
- There is good-quality teaching in evidence across the school; the classroom teams employ a range of methodologies appropriate to the teaching of children with autism.
- The parents' association (PA) is highly commended for the very valuable support it has provided to the school over many years.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- To broaden pupils' access to a range of curriculum areas, a wider variety of curriculum activities should be developed, where pupils have opportunities to engage purposefully in a greater variety of learning across the subject areas.
- To extend pupils' social and communication skills and taking account of their individual needs, further opportunities to undertake pair and group activities should be facilitated in classroom and recreational settings.
- It is recommended that arrangements be put in place to facilitate regular communication with parents' representatives.
- It is recommended that a time frame for the completion of all areas of the school plan be set out.

Findings

1. The learning achievements of pupils

- Good achievement in pupils' learning is in evidence in classrooms. Pupils are enabled to develop suitable behaviours that support their involvement in a wide range of learning and curricular activities. The learning activities undertaken by the pupils are guided by the use of

assessment information in key developmental areas. Systematic monitoring of the pupils' involvement and work in school is undertaken on a consistent basis indicating progress and identifying areas for development. Diagnostic, summative and formative assessment, including classroom observation, recorded data and standardised materials support the development of the pupils' programmes. Across the school there is a good emphasis on the promotion of life-skills, independence and participation in the community. Pupils were observed participating successfully in community activities.

- Language and communication is a core area of the work of the school. There is an appropriate emphasis on functional communication in all classrooms, including the use of augmentative communication, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and manual signing for people with disabilities (LÁMH). Literacy skills are promoted according to individual pupil's abilities and needs. Strategies such as social stories are usefully employed to address specific issues and themes. Pupils are enabled to develop beneficial skills to communicate their needs and to interact with peers and staff members.
- In numeracy, a whole-school approach emphasises the functional and practical application of mathematical skills. Activities undertaken promote pupils' development of skills in areas such as number, money and measures. Good use of concrete materials and practical activities, such as baking, visits to shops and cafés, are in evidence.
- Through integrated activities and thematic approaches, pupils access a variety of learning opportunities across the curriculum areas. Learning activities are differentiated through pupils' individualised programmes and group approaches. To broaden pupils' access to a range of curriculum areas, a wider variety of curriculum activities should be developed, where pupils have opportunities to engage purposefully in a greater variety of learning across the subject areas. Where practicable, the learning activities should be linked to the practical application of skills in the environment. To extend pupils' social and communication skills, and taking account of their individual needs, further opportunities to undertake pair and group activities should be facilitated in classroom and recreational settings.
- This school caters for pupils from the primary through the post-primary stages. School planning to introduce Junior Cycle Level 2 programmes and ASDAN has commenced. As far as practicable, opportunities should be provided to support the pupils' experience of a sense of progression through the school. The range of age-appropriate learning opportunities for pupils of post-primary age should also be extended.

2. Quality of teaching

- There is good-quality teaching in evidence across the school; the classroom teams employ a range of methodologies appropriate to the teaching of children with autism. The class teams of teachers and SNAs and the behaviour analyst collaborate effectively to address pupils' individual learning needs. A good range of child-centred and autism-specific approaches and methodologies is carefully implemented across the school. These include Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) and PECS. The school has recently revised its individualised planning process. Pupils' priority learning needs are identified, provided for and monitored through carefully planned individualised education programmes. In the parent questionnaires, most parents agreed that teaching is good in the school. However, not all parents indicated that they were happy with the opportunities provided to discuss learning targets for their children; this matter should be addressed by the school at an early stage.
- A high standard of planning and preparation is in evidence in classrooms. Teachers base their programmes on the assessed needs of the pupils and on the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines for pupils with general learning difficulties. There is useful collaboration in classroom planning and in the development of the pupils' IEPs. In each classroom setting, visual timetables and schedules indicate clearly the sequence of activities for individual pupils and transitions are managed skilfully. Classroom settings support pupils' learning on an individualised basis, with provision for group activities. It is recommended that wider opportunities for pupils to access

curriculum activities while working in pairs and groups should be developed across the school.

3. Support for pupils' well-being

- There is very good support for pupils' well-being. The highly committed and conscientious staff team demonstrates high levels of co-operation in relation to the care, management and support of the pupils. In the questionnaires, most parents responded that their child enjoys school. There is evidence of a good understanding of the pupils' needs arising from autism and classroom teams attend conscientiously to the pupils' social and life skills through direct teaching activities and incidental opportunities. Pupils are afforded good opportunities to explore the local community, including visits to shops, cafés and the use of amenities such as the library. Building on the existing links with local mainstream schools, further opportunities for pupils to experience inclusive learning settings should be developed, where this is feasible. The school strives to provide a range of learning opportunities to meet the diverse needs of its pupils. The development of the school garden, with parental support, is an example of the school's on-going work in this regard. The PA is highly commended for the very valuable support it has provided to the school over many years and for the resources it has enabled the school to acquire for the benefit of the pupils.
- There is a high level of collaboration in the management of pupils' behaviour. In the questionnaires, all parents agreed that the school helps their child with social and personal development and the majority of parents indicated that the school manages children with challenging behaviour well. The behaviour analyst plays a key role in behaviour management within the school and actively supports the process of devising comprehensive behaviour plans and their implementation. A home-school communication diary is utilised by staff and parents. This process has recently been reviewed involving a process of parental consultation. Some parents indicated that they had not been informed about the school's code of behaviour and school rules and this matter should be addressed.
- 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*

4. Leadership and Management

- The board of management has contributed significantly to the management and development of the school over several years. The board is properly constituted, meets regularly and addresses a range of issues in relation to the school's organisation, management and policy development. The work and commitment of the board on behalf of the school over many years are praised. In the parent questionnaires, most parents indicated that the school was well run and that overall they were happy with the school. Some parents indicated that the school did not seek their views on school matters and that they did not receive a report on the work of the school. It is recommended that arrangements be put in place to facilitate regular communication with parents' representatives.
- While the principal has overall responsibility for the day-to-day management of school, there is an open style of leadership which facilitates communication and effective collaboration among staff members contributing to the delivery of a high-quality service to pupils. The post of principal has changed several times in four years. The acting principal is commended for her work in the leadership and management of the school during a time of very considerable transition. Senior and long-standing staff members have also provided praiseworthy support and leadership as the school develops its practice. The school has commenced the development of a school plan, addressing administrative, pastoral and curricular areas. It is recommended that a time frame for the completion of all areas of the school plan be set out.

5. School Self-evaluation

- The school has engaged well with the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. An SSE report has been compiled and a school improvement plan for language and communication is in place.

Conclusion

There is evidence that school management is highly committed to the ongoing development of the school. This school's capacity to engage in school improvement and develop further is very good.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

On behalf of the school community the Board of Management of Saplings Special School for students with autism and complex needs, welcomes the WSE MLL report. The Board appreciates the positivity of the report and the recognition of our supportive staff and parents in the provision of high standard educational experiences for our students.

The Board of Management is gratified by the numerous strengths noted in the report, in particular:

- Attendance was very good
- Contribution of the board of management in terms of the management and development of the school over several years.
- Effective collaboration among staff
- High-quality service to pupils.
- Highly committed and conscientious staff.
- High levels of co-operation in relation to the care, management and support of pupils.
- Good quality teaching.
- The range of autism-appropriate methodologies employed by the class teams.
- Valuable and supportive parents association.
- Good achievement in pupils' learning in evidence in classrooms.
- Pupils involvement in a wide range of learning and curricular activities
- Systematic monitoring of the pupils progress on a consistent basis.
- Wide range of assessment used to inform and support pupils' programmes.
- Good emphasis on the promotion of life-skills, independence and successful community participation.
- Language and communication is a core area of the work of the school, emphasis on functional communication was noted in all classrooms.
- Useful use of social stories to address specific issues and themes.
- Pupils are enabled to develop beneficial skills to communicate their needs and interact with peers and staff members.
- Good use of concrete materials and practical activities to promote development of mathematical skills.
- Pupils access a variety of learning opportunities across the curriculum areas, through integrated activities and thematic approaches.
- Learning activities are differentiated through pupils' individualised programmes and group approaches.
- The class teams of Teachers, SNAs and Behavioural Analyst collaborate effectively to address pupils' individual learning needs.
- High standard of planning and preparation is in evidence in all classrooms.
- The use of visual timetables and schedules indicate clearly the sequence of activities for individual pupils and transitions are managed skilfully.
- Classroom setting support pupils' learning on an individualised basis, with provision for group activities.
- There is good support for pupils' well-being.
- A home-school communication diary is utilised by staff and parents.
- The school has engaged well with the School Self Evaluation Process.
- The acting principal is commended for her work in the leadership and management of the school during a time of considerable transition.
- Senior and long-standing staff members have also provided praiseworthy support and leadership as the school develops its practice.

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 accepts the recommendations set out in the report and commits to monitoring the implementation of same. Since the WSE MLL took place the school has prioritised the following:

- Teacher's plans will be reviewed to ensure increased opportunities for pupil engagement in a variety of learning across the subject areas.
- Class timetables have been adjusted to include increased opportunity for pupils' participation in pair and group activities, (in the classroom, school garden and local community) with a clear focus on social and communication skills.
- The Board of Management now compiles an agreed report, which is shared with all parents following each meeting.
- The school will set out a timeframe for the completion of all areas of the school plan.