

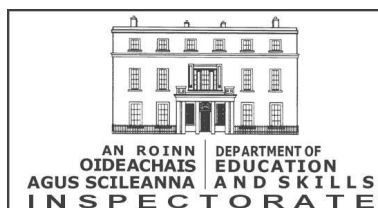
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Saplings Special School,
Austin Friar Street, Mullingar,
Co. Westmeath.

Roll Number: 20373E

Date of inspection: 3 December 2013



Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Saplings Special School, Mullingar in December 2013. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the school, interaction with students and review of their work, meetings with the principal and with board and parent representatives, completed parent 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.

Saplings Special School, Mullingar is a co-educational special school under the patronage of Saplings Schools Ltd. It caters for students with a primary diagnosis on the Autistic Spectrum. Students range in age from four to eighteen years of age and come from counties Meath, Westmeath, Offaly and Roscommon. There are eighteen students enrolled in the school and twenty seven on a waiting list.

In 2011 the school was granted temporary recognition by the Department of Education and Skills and has now applied for permanent recognition.

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

- This is a very effective school in which the overall quality of learning, teaching and care for students is very good.
- All teachers utilise a wide-range of evidence-based methodologies, appropriate to the teaching of children with autism.
- The principal and teachers are very proactive in promoting the inclusion of students in mainstream schools.
- High quality individual behaviour plans are available for all students.
- The work of the director and special needs assistants (SNAs) is of a very high quality.
- Very positive relationships exist between home and school.
- The principal is a very effective school leader.
- The school's capacity to engage in school improvement is very high.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- The school is advised to continue to develop means of assessing the extent to which students have developed skills within subjects such as Social Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) and the Visual Arts.
- The school should develop a range of play intervention strategies appropriate for students with autism and ensure that students engage in a variety of forms of play.
- Teachers are advised to develop protocols and practices to guide a professional, collaborative review of teaching and learning within the school.

- The board is advised to review its enrolment policy to ensure that the enrolment criteria are clear and that there are no conditions attached to enrolment once these criteria are met.

Findings

1. The learning achievements of students

- The overall quality of students' learning is very good. All students have access to the Primary School Curriculum and to appropriate post-primary programmes, where relevant. Students attain some very good outcomes in many subjects including Language and Communication, Mathematics, Visual Arts, Music, and SESE.
- Learning activities are based on clear objectives which are differentiated according to individual need. Teachers and SNAs communicate high but realistic expectations to students and make them aware of what they need to do and when the learning task will be completed. This is very good practice.
- Very good attention is afforded to the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers are commended for the integrated, thematic approach they adopt to literacy and numeracy.
- In literacy, an object-schedule is used for students at a pre-reading stage and some students who are at a reading stage are following an appropriate reading scheme. Some very good work involving personalised reading material is also completed with students. Students engage frequently in writing activities and have opportunities to write for a variety of purposes.
- The emphasis on social mathematics and on relating mathematics to everyday experiences is highly commendable. Students engage in very beneficial learning activities, across all strands of the curriculum, and receive excellent opportunities to apply their mathematical skills through activities such as visiting local shops and hotels.
- Teachers are now encouraged to develop a range of resources in each classroom related to each student's own particular interests, and to utilise these to support that student's learning.
- The principal and teachers are very proactive in promoting the inclusion of students in mainstream schools. Since receiving temporary recognition from the Department, one student has made the transition from this school to a mainstream primary school.
- A broad range of very appropriate assessment strategies are used when students enter the school and during their school life. Assessment data is carefully analysed and very well used to plan for teaching and learning. The school is advised to continue to develop means of assessing the extent to which students have developed the skills within subjects such as SESE and the Visual Arts.

2. Quality of teaching

- Teaching within the school is of a very high quality. Lessons are very well planned, structured and paced. In all classes visual timetables and schedules indicate the sequence of activities and transitions are managed very effectively.
- Teachers employ a wide range of methodologies appropriate to the teaching of children with autism and very skilfully blend group-based learning with one-to-one tuition during lessons.

- Teachers afford very good attention to dealing with language and communication deficits associated with autism. All students, including those who are non-verbal, are supported in developing their communication skills. Information and communication technologies are very skilfully used to support student communication.
- All teachers specifically target social and life skills through dedicated and incidental teaching. There is scope for teachers to further foster students' awareness of each other through increasing the time spent on peer-to-peer interactions both at the beginning of group-based activities and during them. Further visual cues to support peer-to-peer interaction could also be developed.
- The school should now prioritise strategies for dealing with the impairments associated with rigidity of thought and behaviour in children with autism. In dealing with this area, the school should ensure that students receive opportunities to engage in a variety of forms of play. It is also advised to consider the value of some play intervention strategies.

3. Support for students' well-being

- The quality of support for students is very good. The director is responsible for devising an individual behaviour plan for all students. These plans are of a very high standard. They are evidence based and outline functionally equivalent behaviour to be targeted and environmental supports necessary to minimise challenging behaviour.
- The school is very effective in meeting the holistic needs of students. Specific occupational therapy and speech and language goals are available for each student. An individualised sensory diet programme is developed for those students who display complex sensory needs.
- The work of the SNAs is of a very high quality. All SNAs have a very clear understanding of the learning and care needs of the students. They all work very effectively on a one-to-one basis with the students, under the direction of the teachers. The system of rotating the deployment of SNAs within the school is very good.
- Relationships with parents are very positive. All parents, who completed questionnaires administered during this evaluation, agreed that the school was well run, that teaching is good in the school and that their child was doing well in school.
- The school has developed very effective means of communicating with parents about their children's progression. These include bi-annual reports, periodic Individual Educational Programme meetings and information meetings for parents. Parents also receive video clips of their children's school life from the school. This is excellent practice.
- A home-school diary is utilised by teachers and parents to communicate with each other. There is potential to include more information in this diary relating to learning and ways in which parents can support and reinforce learning at home.
- The development of a school website is in its early stages. The school is encouraged to continue with this project and to utilise it to further enhance home-school communication.
- 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 principal is a very effective school leader. She is particularly commended for leading teaching and learning within the school, for promoting a reflective collaborative culture within the school and for monitoring individualised learning programmes for students.
- The deputy principal provides strong support to the principal. She has a clear leadership role in relation to literacy, numeracy the post-primary learning programmes and health and safety. Her functions in all these areas are discharged very capably.
- The board of management is very competent. The chairperson provides admirable leadership to the board and makes a significant contribution to the collaborative culture within the school. Board meetings are held regularly and consider a broad range of issues, including school self-evaluation, teaching and learning. This is very good practice.
- The school, under the leadership of the principal and board, has developed a comprehensive school plan. This plan includes all required administrative policies. Curricular policies document whole-school approaches to teaching and learning which are very appropriate to the teaching of children with autism.
- The board is advised to review its enrolment policy to ensure that the enrolment criteria are clear and that there are no conditions attached to enrolment once these criteria are met. The policy should clearly outline the process for parents to apply for a place in the school. It should also state that enrolment in this school is confined to students for whom there is clear evidence that placement in a special school rather than in a mainstream school is in the child's best interests.

5. School Self-evaluation

- The quality of school self-evaluation is very good. Staff, under the leadership of the principal, has devised a very high quality self-evaluation report and school improvement plan. This is based on robust evidence and has clearly defined targets.
- The school community also engaged in a strategic review of its current strengths and challenges for the future, facilitated by an external facilitator. This resulted in a very positive discussion amongst school staff and a strategic plan is in place arising from this review.
- Teachers are now advised to develop protocols and practices to guide a professional, collaborative review of teaching and learning within the school. *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2012, pp. 57 – 58) provides guidance to schools in this area.

Conclusion

The school's capacity to engage in school improvement is very high.

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 Sapling Special School Mullingar wish to acknowledge the positive and affirming WSE-MLL report, following the recent inspection of our school.

The report is comprehensive and acknowledges the many significant developments which have taken place in the school.

The Board of Management is particularly pleased that the report recognised and commented positively on the following.

- The high quality of teaching within the school with well planned, structured and paced lessons.
- The high quality School Self Evaluation Report and School Improvement Plan.
- The wide range of evidence-based methodologies, appropriate to teaching children with autism and the blend between group based learning and one to one tuition during lessons.
- The integrated, thematic approach adopted by teachers to literacy and numeracy.
- The attention teachers afford to dealing with language and communication deficits associated with autism.
- The emphasis placed on social mathematics and relating mathematics to everyday experiences.
- The effectiveness of the school in meeting the holistic needs of students.
- The high quality Individual Behaviour Plans available for all students, which are evidenced based.
- The broad range of assessment strategies which are analysed and used to plan for teaching and learning, within the school.
- The effective school leadership.
- The strong supportive role and work of the deputy principal.
- The comprehensive Whole School Plan.
- Promotion of the inclusion of pupils in mainstream schools by the school.
- Excellent practice relating to home school communication and the very positive relationships between home and school.
- High quality work of the director.
- The high quality work of the Special Needs Assistants, who have a very clear understanding of learning and care needs of the students.
- Competency and operation of the Board of Management in fulfilling its role, including the leadership of the Chairperson.
- Reflective collaborative culture with the school.
- Very high capacity of the school to engage in school improvement.

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 accepts the conclusions and key recommendations made in the report and the school are currently engaged in planning for and developing the following areas:

- Play Interventions: The school has developed and is implementing a range of play intervention strategies and will continue to further develop in this area.
- Assessment: The school will continue to develop means of assessing the extent to which skills within subjects such as SESE and Visual Arts.
- The school will develop protocols and practices with a view to guiding a collaborative review of teaching and learning.
- Enrolment Policy: The school's enrolment policy has been reviewed to ensure that the enrolment criteria are clear, and that there are not any conditions attached to enrolment once these criteria have been met.