

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

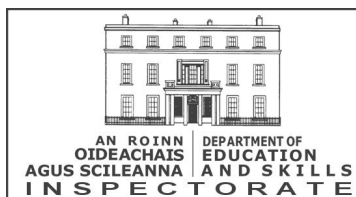
**Whole School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning**

**REPORT**

**Abacas Special School for Children with Autism  
and Complex Needs  
Treepark Road,  
Kilnamanagh, Tallaght, Dublin 24.**

**Uibhir Rolla: 203780**

**Date of inspection: 18 March 2015**



## Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

### Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Abacas Special School for Children with Autism, in March 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 and parent representatives, completed parent questionnaires, and a selection of school documents. 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.

Abacas Special School for Children with Autism and Complex Needs caters for pupils aged between four and eighteen years, who have a primary diagnosis of autism. The school operates under the patronage of Autism Ireland. There are three classes in the school, and the attendance of pupils is very good. In 2011 the school was granted temporary recognition by the Department of Education and Skills.

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

- The principal is highly commended for his effective leadership of the school, which ensures high standards in school organisation, teaching and learning, and the holistic care of pupils.
- Teaching throughout the school is very good, and appropriate teaching approaches and methodologies are utilised in all classrooms.
- Strong links with the primary schools on campus have been established, and initiatives for inclusion and reverse integration are very effectively and collaboratively implemented.
- Structured use is made of the local community for functional and living skills development and generalising of learning.
- Music is very successfully employed as a vehicle for the development of social skills, creativity, self-expression, relaxation, and fun for pupils.
- Whole school policies and curriculum plans, together with classroom planning and Individual Education Plans are of a very good quality.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- To further develop the effectiveness of curriculum planning and assessment it is recommended that curriculum learning plans based on specific objectives be developed for each pupil in literacy, numeracy and SPHE, and that these curriculum objectives should be more explicitly linked to the varied in-class and community-based learning activities.

### Findings

#### 1. The learning achievements of pupils

- Overall the quality of pupils' learning achievements is commendable. All pupils have access to a balanced learning programme which includes life-skills development, curriculum access, social and behavioural development, and opportunities to generalise learning. All families responded to the parent questionnaires, and all agreed that their child was happy in school and was being helped with social and personal development skills, and in their interactions with others.
- All pupils have access to the Primary School Curriculum, and learning tasks are carefully tailored and differentiated to meet individual needs and abilities. Pupils develop numeracy skills through individual station work and group work. They apply

mathematical skills in real-life contexts in the community through shopping and travel and a range of carefully constructed community based learning experiences.

- In Language and Communication, pupils develop skills using a variety of communication resources and appropriate interventions. Lámh and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) are used to support meaningful communication and to help pupils to make their needs and wants known. Pupils' initiation of communication is prioritised, their progression is carefully tracked, and informal communication is maximised throughout the day. Reading and writing skills are fostered at an appropriate level.
- Strong links with the primary schools on campus have been established, and initiatives for inclusion and reverse integration are very effectively and collaboratively implemented. While some pupils are integrated for part of the day in mainstream school settings, all enjoy the benefits of the very well-organised reverse integration programme.
- Information from a wide variety of assessment records indicates that pupils are making good progress in respect of their prioritised learning needs.

## **2. Quality of teaching**

- The overall quality of teaching in the school is very good. All staff demonstrate a depth of understanding of the specific learning needs of the pupils. Teaching approaches and methodologies address the social, communication, and behavioural needs of pupils very effectively. Staff are cognisant of pupils' predominant visual learning modality. Expertise, knowledge, and understanding of autistic spectrum disorders and co-occurring special learning and sensory needs are evident in all aspects of school culture, organisation, policy, planning, and classroom practice.
- Classrooms are very well-managed and there is a high level of cooperation between the teachers and the SNAs. A multi-sensory approach to suit the different learning styles and strengths of the pupils is deeply embedded in all lessons. The shared priority aim is to set pupils up with functional learning and prioritised life skills, to enable them to live in the community, and to achieve learning and social and communication attainments commensurate with their potential.
- Teacher's classroom plans reflect the breath and balance of the curriculum. They are explicitly linked to curriculum strands and strand units, and are specifically differentiated for each individual pupil. They afford very appropriate lesson structure and clear differentiated learning.
- Whole-school curriculum plans provide good quality practical guidance for teachers. Classroom planning and Individual education planning (IEPs) are of a very good standard. IEPs and group plans are devised collaboratively, and the targets reflect pupils' priority learning needs. Parents are included as partners in the planning and review processes.

Visual timetables and group work schedules are a feature of practice in all classrooms. A wide range of assessment records are maintained and utilised to progress pupils' learning and skills. These very valuable assessment records are maintained for each pupil across a range of learning and behavioural categories. To further develop the effectiveness of curriculum planning and assessment it is recommended that curriculum learning plans based on specific curriculum objectives be developed for each pupil in literacy, numeracy and SPHE, and that these curriculum objectives should be more explicitly linked to the varied in-class and community based learning activities.

### 3. Support for pupils' well-being

- Support for pupils' well-being is very good. There is evidence of very good collaboration between the behaviour analyst, principal and staff in providing for pupils' holistic needs. The behaviour analyst works closely with staff to develop positive behaviour plans for pupils and to support the effective implementation of behaviour strategies. She also provides advice and training for staff and parents on positive behaviour management. The team of sixteen SNAs very competently and caringly demonstrate commitment, flexibility, and they provide very good quality support for the pupils.
- Pupils have access to the primary curriculum and to ASDAN. Plans are in place to provide a Junior Certificate Level 2 Programme, beginning September 2015. A very good transition strategy is in place to help pupils in their transition from the school into other settings. Integration and reverse integration programmes benefit the pupils in both mainstream and special school settings.
- Music plays an important and active role in teaching, learning, and pupil well-being, and is very successfully employed as a vehicle to encourage social skills, creativity, self-expression, relaxation, and fun for pupils. Emphasis is placed on listening, responding, and performing. The aim is to promote enjoyment for all, with a particular focus on those who don't naturally enjoy or respond positively to music because of their needs.
- Communication with parents is very good, Home-School diaries are very effectively utilised, and the school operates an 'open door' policy for parents. The celebration of pupils' work and successes, and the effective use of a token economy all contribute to the happiness and well being of the pupils. The well-equipped sensory room, and newly created sensory garden afford oases for pupils to relax and enjoy nature. In questionnaire responses all parents agreed that they are happy with the school, that their child feels safe in school, is well looked after, and is treated fairly and respectfully.
- 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 committed board of management is properly constituted and meets regularly. Strong links with the school and local community have been fostered. The board has very effectively managed the development and transition of the school. The board regularly involves itself in school policy and planning reviews. All policies have been ratified and school accounts are audited annually. The board is recommended to formulate an agreed report after each formal meeting, with a view to disseminating relevant information to staff and the school community.
- The principal is highly commended for his effective whole-school leadership, which ensures high standards in school organisation, teaching and learning, and the holistic care of pupils.
- The in-school management team works collaboratively to manage the smooth running of the school, and has led and engaged with the SSE process very enthusiastically. The school has responded positively to previous inspection report recommendations, which have been constructively and beneficially incorporated into whole-school policy and classroom practice.

## **5. School Self-evaluation**

- The capacity to self-reflect and develop is very good. The school has engaged very effectively with the School Self-evaluation (SSE) process. School improvement plans (SIPs) have been implemented in Literacy and Numeracy, and are now embedded in practice in every classroom and at whole school level. The English and Mathematics whole-school curriculum plans have been reviewed to reflect new SSE targets and methodologies. The tracking of progress against curriculum objectives in literacy and numeracy would assist in the monitoring of the SIP.

## **Conclusion**

There is a very strong commitment from all stake-holders to the continued development of the school, to provision of appropriate facilities and learning opportunities. The school's capacity to develop further and to engage in school improvement 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.**

The Board welcomes this very positive report and commends the staff for their professionalism and dedication to the students and their families.

The report affirms the array of strengths within the school and the many features of good practice being implemented. Everyone on the Board and all associated with Abacas Special School in Kilnamanagh are very proud of the school and what it has achieved over a relatively short period of time. We look forward to going from strength to strength in the coming years.

#### **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 welcomes any recommendations made by the inspectorate and in particular a recommendation that may lead to an improved quality of learning and assessment for our students. The Board is therefore committed to implementing the recommendation that curriculum objectives could be more explicitly linked to the many and varied in-class and community based activities. The Board is pleased to report that this process has already begun.

