

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT
Saint Joseph's Special School
Balrothery, Tallaght, Dublin 24
Uimhir rolla: 19520H

Date of inspection: 16 September 2013



1. Introduction

St Joseph's Special School caters for students from four to eighteen years of age from a wide catchment area. It operates under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. The school welcomes students from a diverse range of backgrounds, ethnicities and needs. The enrolment includes students with mild general learning disability, moderate general learning disability, behavioural disorders, autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and Asperger syndrome. In addition, an ASD unit includes three classes which cater exclusively for students with a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder. Currently there are eighty eight students on roll. This represents a drop in enrolment of twenty six percent over the past academic year. The Primary School Curriculum is taught at primary level. At post primary level, the Junior Certificate (JC) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) are provided, and all students have access to a modern European language. The FETAC programme has been discontinued this year. 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 board of management meets regularly and members have assigned duties, which they undertake conscientiously.
- The deputy principal demonstrates commendable competence in the execution of her duties.
- A good quality attendance strategy has been initiated.
- The school is engaging effectively in the school self-evaluation process.
- Post primary teachers provide good quality teaching and facilitate good quality learning in their individual subject areas.
- The school provides opportunities for students to engage in a range of physical and sporting activities.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- An action plan for the cyclical review of whole school policies and planning should be devised. This should include procedures for the dissemination of all policies to the whole school community.
- The school's newly developed code of behaviour should be disseminated to the school community and be utilised consistently throughout the school for managing challenging behaviour. It is important that a collaborative ethos is developed in every classroom to optimise support for students.
- It is recommended that the in-school management team should prioritise whole school communication and the effective implementation of the curriculum for improvement.
- Effective procedures for the safe reception and dismissal of students at school opening and closing times should be established without delay.

- A review of individual teachers' planning is recommended. Prioritised learning targets set in individual education plans (IEPs) should be included within these plans.
- Students at primary level should be provided with full access to the Primary School Curriculum.
- It is recommended that all teachers engage in an appropriate range of assessment procedures in order to establish baselines of students' learning achievement, as a basis for the appropriate scaffolding and progressing of individual students' learning, and to provide for specific differentiation.
- Teachers in the classes for ASD should develop their understanding of the specific needs of students with an ASD in order to provide optimal teaching and learning opportunities for them.

3. Quality of School Management

- There are significant deficits in the management and leadership of the school. A comprehensive review of current policies and practices should be undertaken, and a collaborative action plan developed to address curricular, organisational and pastoral deficiencies within the school.
- The board of management meets regularly and members have assigned duties, which they undertake conscientiously. On-going efforts are in place to appoint a second parent representative to the board. Relevant training in relation to duties and finance has been undertaken by individual members, and school accounts are audited annually. Board members should continue to familiarise themselves with roles and responsibilities under the Education Act 1998, in order to guide and develop the school. The board has identified in-school communication and inter-staff relationships as a main priority for improvement, and plans to resolve identified issues should be devised and implemented without delay.
- The board acknowledges the need for, and is currently involved with outside support agencies in the review of the school's enrolment policy. To this end, the board should ensure that the school policy sets out specific criteria for student intake which is adhered to consistently.
- An action plan for the cyclical review of whole-school policies and plans should be devised collaboratively with the in-school management team. All plans should be ratified by the board and a review date set. Procedures for the dissemination of school policies to the whole school community should be devised.
- The school building and school interior are in very good condition following the recent completion of extensive refurbishment carried out on behalf of the board.
- It was noted that the integrity of the school day is not being maintained. It is recommended that this situation be rectified as soon as possible.
- Registers are lacking some of the required details. It is recommended that the school registers be completed as required under section 123 (1) of the *Rules for National Schools*.

- The deputy principal provides good support to the principal, staff, and students, and demonstrates commendable competence in the execution of her duties. The in-school management team has not met formally during the past year. Assigned roles and responsibilities do not reflect the priority needs of the school. This team cites poor communication as a significant concern. Since good leadership by the in-school management team is critical for the future effective delivery of an appropriate education for all students, it is recommended that this team meet regularly, undertake a review of their roles and responsibilities in line with circular 07/03, and identify and address the priority needs of the school and the effective implementation of the curriculum. The development of positive, whole-school communication strategies should be an immediate priority. The approaches discussed with the in-school management team during the inspection should support this process.
- A good quality attendance strategy has been initiated as a result of a previous inspection recommendation. The deputy principal meets monthly with the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) to ensure good attendance by students, and absences are logged on attendance sheets in all classes. Every teacher should accurately log students' absences and the reason for their absence with a view to enhancing the success of the attendance strategy.
- Significant difficulties were noted with regard to the management of students. Many students, especially those in the post primary section, regularly exit classrooms and seek meetings with management. These practices should be permitted only in cases of extreme need or where child protection issues arise, and should always be logged. Similarly, the suspension of students for misbehaviour should always adhere to the NEWB procedures and operate within the agreed school policy. In student questionnaire responses, more than half of the students said they did not like school and did not think that their school was a good school. A significant number reported that they did not know the school rules. It is recommended that the school's newly-developed code of behaviour be disseminated to students and the school community and be utilised consistently.
- The school has recently undertaken the purchase of requisites to equip a resource room and a library. A suitable system for students to utilise this newly-stocked central library should be devised immediately. In addition, it is recommended that every class should have a core set of resources as well as easy access to specialised central resources as required. The development of a whole-school policy in this regard is advised. The school has a newly-equipped Information and Communications Technology (ICT) room. In questionnaire responses, the majority of students indicated that they do not use computers or interactive whiteboards most days. The school should endeavour to make the optimal use of ICT for teaching and learning.
- The school issues a yearly report to parents and meets with them for formal parent/teacher meetings and IEP meetings. Communication is also maintained by some teachers through the students' communication book. In their responses to a questionnaire for parents, a majority of parents said they were happy with the school and that the work their children did was matched to their ability. However, a significant number of parents expressed concern about not being involved in the development of school policies, and were unhappy with discipline within the school.
- The management of communications between home and school should be further developed. There is currently no parents' association in place. To increase parental involvement, consideration should be given to the establishment of a parents' association in the school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The quality of whole-school curriculum planning is poor. A collaborative approach to planning for all curriculum areas is recommended so that this planning will inform teaching and learning at classroom level. Some good quality organisational and policy plans are in place. It is recommended that a process of dissemination of all school policies to the whole-school community be devised.
- There is significant scope to develop individual teachers' planning. Long-term planning should be linked directly to curriculum objectives. Short-term planning should be prepared either weekly or fortnightly, and should include clear learning objectives and expected learning outcomes. Prioritised learning targets set in IEPs should be included within these plans. Teachers are reminded of Rule 126 *Rules for National Schools* in relation to the maintenance of their monthly progress records.
- The school is actively engaging in the school self-evaluation process. The challenge now is to collaborate in ensuring that school self-evaluation decisions are embedded in teachers' classroom practice.
- During the whole-school evaluation it was noted that the school's Child Protection policy and procedures were not fully compliant with Department of Education and Skills' Circular 65/2011, Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, and the Children First- National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011. The policy was not written in accordance with the revised 2011 template, and contained definitions, symptoms, and signs of child abuse which were inconsistent with 2011 Department Child protection Procedures. During and following the inspection the school has worked assiduously to bring its child protection policy and procedures fully into compliance with the requirements of the Department.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Student Achievement

- The quality of teaching, learning and student achievement varies significantly, with good practice observed in some classes. During the evaluation visit, it was observed that all teachers had prepared a satisfactory range of resources, and these were generally used to good effect. However, it was also noted that in a number of classrooms teachers' expectations of students' learning and behaviour is low. As a result, students' skills development is not optimised. A narrow range of teaching approaches is used in many classes. A lack of appropriate planning impacts significantly on many teachers' ability to ensure relevant teaching, to provide suitable learning activities, and to consolidate students' learning. The creation of a positive learning environment in all classrooms and throughout the school is recommended. A wider range of methodologies, including active learning, cooperative learning, and ICT should be utilised to engage students more fully in their own learning process and to enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem. All teachers in primary and ASD classes should provide opportunities for a broad and balanced access to the primary school curriculum for all learners.
- In the classes for ASD teachers displayed some understanding of the importance of a balance of individual station work and group work. Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH) stations have been set up in each class, and provision has been made for students to work together in groups. TEACCH methodologies should now be fully utilised. It is advised that incidental learning opportunities be used throughout the day to optimise learning. Individual students' visual timetables should be provided and used consistently to support students' academic, social and communicative skills development.

- In many classes students were well managed and courteous during classroom visits. Many individual teachers had positive behaviour strategies in place to encourage good student behaviour. However, in a number of classes students were not on task and were not abiding by the school rules. They did not listen adequately to each other and they did not listen to the teacher. All teachers are advised to utilise positive behaviour strategies in line with the school's newly developed Code of Behaviour. In addition, a more creative approach to the use of a variety of teaching methodologies and resources, with well planned lesson content and specific intended learning outcomes should be explored by all teachers. This will contribute to the enhancement of student engagement in the learning process and the development of positive behaviour within all classrooms.
- There is scope to develop the provision for language and communication in the school. There is evidence that teachers are aware of the importance of the development of language skills across the curriculum, but the approach to this is inconsistent. It is recommended that all teachers implement a focused, oral language programme in order to develop specific language skills, and to incrementally enhance students' confidence and competence in speaking.
- Lessons observed in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) were effective, and resources used were of a good quality. Good standards of care for students by staff were evident. The SPHE programme should now be extended to enhance students' self-esteem, and to promote a positive school climate and atmosphere where students' successes and achievements are consistently celebrated, and where good behaviour is promoted and rewarded.
- Good practice was observed in all post primary classes. Subject specific planning was satisfactory. The curriculum at post primary level is complemented through provision of four subject teachers. These teachers provide good quality teaching and facilitate good quality learning in their individual subject areas, Woodwork, Home Economics, Art and ICT.
- There is significant scope for development in the area of student assessment. There was no evidence that advice given in relation to assessment at the last WSE was implemented. While whole-school diagnostic testing is undertaken yearly and the results incorporated into some IEPs, the formative, summative, diagnostic and evaluative purpose of assessment needs to be recognised by all staff. It is recommended that all teachers engage in an appropriate range of assessment procedures in order to establish baselines of students' learning achievement, to appropriately scaffold and progress individual student's learning, and to provide for specific differentiation. Recording processes need to be agreed at a whole-school level in order to consistently track students' learning. Student profiles should also be established and follow the students from class to class as they progress through the school.

6. Quality of Support for Students

- Students' IEPs have been drawn up in consultation with parents. The school reports that all parents are provided with a copy of their child's IEP document. Common planning templates have been recently introduced and this is good practice. There is scope to improve the student strengths and needs analysis and to ensure that specific, measurable, prioritised learning targets are central to each student's plan. The management of the school should ensure that the IEP is an integral part of every teacher's planning folder. The school is advised to structure the IEP process so that targets are already in place at the start of each new school year.

- The special needs assistants (SNAs) make a valuable contribution to the work of the school. Their duties are clearly defined and regularly rotated in line with good practice. The development of a team approach within classrooms would enhance the support provided to students by SNAs.
- Effective procedures for the safe reception and dismissal of students at school opening and closing times should be established without delay.
- Some senior students who are not studying the JC or LCA programmes could benefit considerably from access to courses such as those with FETAC accreditation, which were previously offered in the school, and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Level 2 programmes.
- The school provides for student engagement in a range of physical and sporting activities including Irish dancing, soccer skills training and basketball training. Students partake, with great success, in the Football Association of Ireland League for Special Schools each year.

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 acknowledges the recommendations and main strengths highlighted in the report. Shortly after the completion of the evaluation for this report significant changes were made to in-school management including the appointment of new Principal and Deputy Principal teachers. The Principal and staff with the support of the Board are working to implement all the recommendations in the report.

Two paragraphs in Section 3 of the report stand out as needing particular comment. The very first paragraph speaks of significant deficits in the management and leadership of the school. In this area, the Board along with the newly appointed Principal and Deputy Principal and the In-School Management (ISM) team are working to rectify the situation.

In the third paragraph on page 3, attention is drawn to the fact that many students in the post primary section exit classrooms and seek meetings with management. A revised approach to this issue has been adopted resulting in the virtual elimination of this practice, while at the same time maintaining a compassionate and supportive environment for students. In recent visits to the school, Board members have noticed how much more tranquil and workmanlike the atmosphere is.

The Board also wishes to acknowledge the considerable work undertaken to date on the school self-evaluation process as highlighted in the report.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

A thorough review of school policies is ongoing, through collaboration, co-operation and communication with staff, parents and the whole school community.

The school ISM team meets weekly. There are weekly information sharing meetings for all staff with regular teacher meetings and full staff meetings each term.

Strict procedures are now implemented on a daily basis for the safe arrival and departure of all students.

Teacher planning is under review to encompass prioritised targets for Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that are achievable and appropriate according to students' needs. The calendar for IEP review has been adapted accordingly.

Access to the primary curriculum for students at primary level is under immediate review to enable students to access all areas of the curriculum with differentiation as appropriate in both the primary and ASD areas.

A review of Assessment procedures as Assessment for and of Learning, Diagnostic Assessment and Testing is in place to prioritise learning targets in tandem with IEP planning.

The school is reviewing appropriate professional development training for all staff, specifically in the areas of autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs). It acknowledges that 10 of the 17 teaching staff hold Post Graduate Diplomas in SEN.

There are now two elected parents on the Board of Management and an active Parents' Association has been formed.

The school is actively seeking the support of, and actively engaging with external agencies specifically in the areas of Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Home School Liaison, appropriate counselling services for students, Challenging Behaviour Management specialisation and further access to the National Educational Psychological Service, with a view to catering better for the very complex needs - intellectual, psychological, social, emotional and behavioural of all the students in the school.

Up to now the school has not been adequately equipped with appropriate ICT or interactive whiteboards. The Board, the staff and school community are actively seeking funding for interactive whiteboards to be installed in each classroom to allow pupils reap maximum benefit from Assistive Technologies.

The length of the school day has been adjusted to adhere to current guidelines.

All SNAs are currently engaged in full implementation of the Haddington Road Agreement.

The school is currently reviewing an appropriate programme for students not engaged in Junior Cert or LCA. All students in the school engage in an appropriate SPHE/Social Education Programme.

The school is currently updating an interactive website to encourage ongoing inclusion, communication, collaboration and dissemination of school information to enable the process of growth and development of the school in the light of considerable changes taking place.