An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Kevin’s School
Infirmary Road Cork
Uimhir rolla: 19788D

Date of inspection: 16 June 2011
1. Introduction

The school provides a positive educational experience for pupils for whom mainstream school placement is deemed to be inappropriate, and it supports teenagers at risk of leaving school early. Current enrolment is twenty-one: eighteen boys and three girls.

The school is located in a building which has many shortcomings for use as a school. Management and staff have endeavoured to create an appropriate learning environment, but their efforts are hindered by lack of space and inadequate recreation areas. Poor acoustic conditions lead to high levels of interruptions. In these difficult circumstances staff members are often involved in managing confrontations with pupils.

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 provides supportive direction to the school.
- The new principal has high expectations the school. She is dedicated to promoting a culture of collaborative decision-making.
- Competent teachers provide relevant learning experiences ensuring that pupils experience success.
- Capable special needs assistants succeed in promoting pupils’ self-esteem.
- Valuable, age-appropriate, nationally accredited programmes are provided.

The following main recommendations are made:

- The in-school management team should prepare a development plan to address the school’s emerging needs.
- Teachers should plan together to extend the range of methodologies, which should include more active learning
- Staff should continue to avail of professional training opportunities in relation to the management of behaviour.
- The teachers should be involved in managing afternoon programmes.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board is well informed and provides sensible guidance to the staff. The board should now engage with and assist the staff in a more rigorous process of school self-evaluation and in developing a three-year action plan. In particular, this action plan should address the issues of pupil attendance, behaviour management and the optimum utilization of human resources.
- The school day, as it is currently organised, does not fully conform to Department requirements and should be reconfigured in line with the relevant regulations.
The new principal is conscious of the instructional leadership dimension of her role. She sets high expectations for the school. She values the work of her colleagues, and is dedicated to promoting a culture of collaborative decision making.

The in-school management team carries out a range of duties which should now be reviewed to ensure that they reflect the changing priorities of the school.

While a number of useful strategies to promote good attendance are already in place, the poor attendance of some pupils remains a cause for concern.

During the evaluation, pupils’ behaviour was generally good and staff members used positive feedback to promote good behaviour. The teachers are aware that they need to be flexible and sensitive in dealing with pupils. However, records indicate that the management of challenging behaviour is a daily concern.

In reviewing the code of behaviour, the use of suspension should be reconsidered. The teachers have begun to access specific training regarding behaviour management. This training should be of assistance to staff in their understanding of the functions of behaviours and in their management of the pupils.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

The school has prepared a wide range of organisational and curriculum plans. A major focus of the work has been on the Junior Certificate School Programme and Junior Certificate Programme. Conscious of the school's status as a special school, the staff have been examining the overall suitability of the curriculum. In this process staff should examine the curriculum document of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for children in care, as the guidance provided will assist them in providing an education that is centred on pupils' learning needs.

The pupils each have a number of class teachers and specialist teachers. There is need for teachers to plan collectively. For pupils who have general learning disabilities, the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities (NCCA) should inform planning. The role of specialist teachers should be examined with a view to maximizing their contribution to the promotion of literacy, numeracy and social skills.

The teachers design individualised education programmes (IEPs) for pupils. Many strategies within these IEPs are suitable. However, some short-term objectives are not sufficiently specific and do not clearly identify learning outcomes. It is recommended that staff engage further with the IEP process and develop a more collaborative approach to setting specific targets for individual pupils.

School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools. Evidence was provided to show that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.
5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Staff members have developed some innovative teaching practices. Resources, including the local environment and various extra-curricular activities are used to enrich teaching. However, there is considerable scope for development in this area. Information and Communication Technology is often used in promoting learning. In some cases, teaching could be enhanced by providing more hands-on activity with more use of concrete materials.

- In English, differentiation in planning is in evidence and emphasis is placed on developing the pupils’ functional reading and writing skills. All classrooms provide a language-rich source for the pupils’ development in oral English. Pupils engage in reading on a daily basis. A variety of books that are graded according to reading difficulty are used to give the pupils extensive experience of independent reading. Written work in pupils’ copies and folders is monitored closely. The quality of this work, including poetry composition, is often good. Pupils’ work is word-processed, and their finished work is recognised and displayed. The pupils have participated in literacy initiatives. Their work is sometimes presented in professionally bound hardback books. The resource/literacy programme is well developed, and it should now be linked to the English Plan.

- Mathematics programmes are individualised to suit pupils’ needs. Pupils have opportunities to develop their understanding of the basic mathematical concepts and to acquire the skills necessary for computation and problem solving. The lessons observed during the evaluation were well managed. Effective questioning by the teachers confirmed the learning achieved by the pupils, and challenged them to think for themselves. Pupils’ written work is well monitored. Some of the work is text-book based but teachers also use concrete examples to teach concepts and to make links with pupils’ practical experiences. Some very good cross-curricular connections were made with other curriculum areas, and this approach should be extended.

- In Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), learning and teaching occur both formally and informally. In discrete teaching time for SPHE, pupils discuss and write about a variety of suitable topics. The range of SPHE resources is extensive. The Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme is implemented in designated lessons with external support. In this school context in particular, all teachers should contribute to delivering SPHE. Therefore the practice of allocating SPHE as a specific subject to an individual teacher should be reviewed.

- The school has a well-equipped kitchen which is located in the damp-prone basement. The Fear an Tí provides a programme of practical skills which help to prepare pupils for independent living.

- Afternoon programmes are sponsored by the Cork City Vocational Education Committee. Pupils encounter a range of experiences which have relevance to SPHE, such as animal welfare. Some afternoon programmes take place during official school time. The class teachers should be appropriately involved in the management of these programmes.

- Resources for Physical Education are very poor. Handball is played in an unsuitable outdoor area. A pool table and improvised table tennis are also provided. In order to extend the provision the school makes use a hall in the locality. In addition, swimming is organised as part of the afternoon activities. Teacher planning makes specific reference to a range of activities including circuit training, road bowling and sprint running. Pupils present with individual strengths in sports which are encouraged and supported by staff members. In afternoon activities, pupil-adult relationships can be greatly enhanced.
through joint participation. It is recommended that the class teachers be more involved to ensure adequate curriculum coverage of the strands of the PE curriculum.

- Pupil creativity is fostered in Art and Woodwork. Work in Drama has culminated in a very impressive, professionally produced film which was scripted and created largely by the students themselves. Teachers should develop this curriculum area further. The pupils enjoy their music-making activities. The teachers should plan collaboratively to further develop the music curriculum with a particular emphasis on percussion and listening to music.

- Staff members have identified Science as an area they would like to develop. If available, Horticulture could be used as a means of promoting an interest in gardening as a life hobby or career option.

- A range of formal and informal assessment approaches is used including standardised, diagnostic and criterion-referenced testing. Monthly records of students’ progress are provided. These records identify the areas of curriculum that the pupils have encountered. However, the acquisition of skills, knowledge and progress of the pupils should also be documented. Pupils’ social skills development should be monitored more closely. Subject specific, criterion-referenced assessment could be developed also.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- The school sensitively supports pupils who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The resource teacher provides tuition in reading and writing as required. A counsellor is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Educational psychologists from NEPS also provide support.

- The school’s special needs assistants (SNAs) assist with the supervision of students, and they support pupils in accessing particular activities. The SNAs, along with the secretary and caretaker, contribute significantly to the maintenance of a positive social and educational environment in the school.

- While there is no parents association, the school achieves notable success in involving parents. Home-school links are well developed. The community worker supports families at important times including transition points in a pupil’s education. She also organises adult learning programmes. The central involvement of parents in the awards day is a welcome feature of school life.

- When interviewed, parent representatives on the board of management were supportive of the work of the school. They were affirmative in their comments about the education being provided. Responses to parent questionnaires indicated that parents are positive about the school while being aware of its shortcomings in terms of facilities.