An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Evaluation of Provision for Students with Additional and Special Educational Needs in Post-Primary Schools

REPORT

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<th>Ainm na scoile / School name</th>
<th>Castlecomer Community School</th>
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<td>Seoladh na scoile / School address</td>
<td>Castlecomer</td>
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Date of inspection: 01-04-2019
EVALUATION OF PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The Evaluation of Provision for Students with Additional and Special Educational Needs (SEN - PP) is a focused evaluation of provision for students with additional and special educational needs in mainstream post-primary schools. As this inspection model places a particular emphasis on the quality of learner outcomes for students with additional and special educational needs, most of the time spent in the school by inspectors is given to visits to mainstream classes and support settings.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

During this inspection, the inspector evaluated provision for students with additional and special educational needs under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. The quality of learning outcomes of students with additional and special educational needs
2. The quality of learning experiences of students with additional and special educational needs
3. The quality of the management and use of resources received by the school to support students with additional and special educational needs
4. The quality of the structures in place to foster inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of all students with additional and special educational needs

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate’s quality continuum, which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school’s provision in each area.

The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

CHILD PROTECTION

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school’s child protection procedures were conducted:

1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as a mandated person.

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.
Evaluation of Provision for Students with Additional and Special Educational Needs

Date of inspection | 01-04-2019
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Inspection activities undertaken | Meeting with special needs assistants
| Observation of teaching and learning
| Examination of students’ work
| Interaction with students
| Student group discussion
| Analysis of parent questionnaires
| Feedback to principal and teachers

**SCHOOL CONTEXT**
Established in 1987, Castlecomer Community School is under the joint trusteeship of the Presentation Sisters and the Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board. The school has a current enrolment of 538 students. The school provides the Junior Cycle, an optional Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). The school has two special classes, The Loft and The Den, for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**FINDINGS**
- The quality of learner outcomes in the lessons observed was good overall, with significant variation ranging from fair to very good.
- The quality of learner experiences was good overall, and while there was scope for improvement, the inclusive ethos of the school was in evidence in the lived experiences of the students.
- The management and use of resources provided to support students with SEN requires improvement so that the additional learning needs of all students can be fully addressed.
- A dedicated small core team of trained Special Education Teachers (SET) works hard to ensure students are well supported and the transition to the new model of provision for students with additional needs is underway.
- The school fosters students’ holistic development by providing a broad range of curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular learning opportunities and promotes its core principles of inclusion and respect for diversity in its policies and in daily practice.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**
- The board of management, together with senior management, should ensure that the full teaching allocation for students with SEN is deployed for its intended purpose, and that all practice complies with Circular Letter 0014/2017 and with the associated Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools.
- The core SEN team should be expanded and strategies need to be put in place so that timetabling and planning can be driven by the individual needs of all students with SEN.
- Senior leadership, in collaboration with the SET, should ensure that students who access support lessons are grouped according to similarity of need and according to the principle that the students with the greatest level of need should receive the greatest level of support.
Mainstream and support teachers should consider the students’ identified priority learning needs and targets when planning lessons, and deploy differentiated teaching strategies in order to optimise learning for these students.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. THE QUALITY OF LEARNING OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- The quality of learner outcomes was good overall, with significant variation ranging from fair to very good. Learner outcomes were best when students were highly engaged in meaningful learning activities that were contextualised so that they were relevant to their lives, when learning intentions were aligned with students’ needs, and when the lesson provided them with a sense of achievement and wellbeing. This highly effective practice was observed in almost half of the lessons.

- Support lessons focusing mostly on literacy or numeracy are provided to groups of students who have exemptions from Irish or who do not study a foreign language. In the lessons observed, the needs of the students were diverse, and while the learning intentions may have been appropriate for some students, for others they were not aligned with the students’ needs. This resulted in limited outcomes for these students.

- Some students are withdrawn from all of their base Maths classes for small group work in this core subject. This practice is not in keeping with the guidelines associated with the new model of provision for students with additional needs. In the first instance, the timetabling of student supports should seek to include students in their mainstream classes, providing co-teaching or other inclusive forms of support. Withdrawal of a student from all mainstream lessons in a core subject should only be undertaken when all other forms of support have been deemed inappropriate.

- Learning outcomes for students who access the special classes were mostly very good. Students demonstrated steady progression in their social and self-regulation skills. They reported that they were benefitting from the combination of integration with mainstream lessons and access to the supported setting. In a minority of mainstream lessons attended by these students, there was scope for teachers to provide more opportunities for increased social interaction with peers.

- It was observed that poor attendance was a significant issue for students who access the LCA programme, some of whom have additional needs. Management and staff should consider the reasons for this, consult with students and parents, and make decisions that utilise resources efficiently and are in the best interests of the students.
2. THE QUALITY OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- The quality of learner experience was good overall; students reported that they were well cared for by their teachers and all interactions were respectful and conducive to wellbeing. It was evident that teachers knew their students well and wanted to support their learning effectively. In all lessons teachers presented students with learning activities that were planned and prepared. Almost all parents reported that their child feels safe and happy at school.

- While the learning environment was positive, there was some variation in the levels of student engagement observed. Most students demonstrated higher levels of interest when they were actively involved with learning and when tasks were differentiated and the level of challenge was appropriate. However, in some lessons there were missed opportunities to engage students’ interest by reducing reliance on the textbook or worksheet, and presenting learners with activities in which they could learn the content without having to contend with the written word.

- In some lessons, visual inputs were used very effectively to support learning; a video clip was shown to demonstrate a point or a graphic organiser was used to summarise and consolidate learning. However, there were many instances where a more comprehensive use of visual inputs could have supported learning considerably. Teachers should be cognisant of the benefits of presenting content in a variety of ways. Greater and more creative use of digital technologies was recommended in some lessons.

- An appropriate balance between teacher instruction and student activity was observed in most lessons. In some highly effective lessons, students were given opportunities to contribute, ask questions or argue different points of view. This resulted in active and engaging partnership where students demonstrated high levels of enjoyment and motivation.

- In some lessons differentiation was limited to direct questioning and the practice whereby the teacher circulated during activities to support students requiring additional help. Consideration should be given to developing differentiated learning intentions, tasks, homework or assessments. Subject teachers should use the subject planning process to share effective practice and build up a bank of usefully differentiated resources and ideas.

- Much work has gone into the development of the school’s ‘green book’ initiative to support formative assessment and while some highly effective practice was observed, there was scope to further embed this practice across all subjects.

- Students reported that they are regularly required to take down notes from the board and this presents a range of difficulties, including getting all of the writing down in time, getting it down legibly and copying down and listening to the teacher at the same time. Teachers should be mindful of the writing difficulties of some of their students and consider how digital technologies could be used to support learning and avoid the aforementioned challenges for learners.

- Some highly effective support lessons addressed organisation and planning skills in a way that took cognisance of learning needs, encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and promoted independence and autonomy.
3. THE MANAGEMENT AND USE OF RESOURCES RECEIVED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- The management and use of the additional teaching allocation provided to support students with additional or special educational needs requires significant change. Almost half of the hours allocated to the school could not be accounted for on the school provision plan. Of those that were listed on the school provision plan, some were deployed in a manner that runs contrary to both the principles of the new model of SEN provision and the inclusive ethos of the school. All of the teaching allocation for SEN should be used to provide supports to students with additional needs.
- When timetabling support lessons, students should be grouped according to similarity of need so that these lessons become opportunities for targeted interventions addressing priority learning needs. For example, students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs should be provided with opportunities for rapid development of English language skills targeting academic language so that they can access the curriculum successfully.
- Management needs to ensure that the SET core team is expanded so that timetabling and planning can take account of the individual needs of all students. As this team develops it will be important to establish clear lines of communication with parents, mainstream teachers and management so that ongoing review and monitoring of practice can take place.
- Currently most of the students enrolled in the special classes spend most of their time in the mainstream. Routine monitoring of placement in the special class should be reviewed with a view to handing over placement to the mainstream support team wherever appropriate. Where a student in the mainstream is diagnosed with ASD, teachers should consider what supports can be provided by the mainstream SET before considering placement within the special class.
- It is positive that management and the SET continue to access continuous professional development on the new model of provision for students with additional needs. Further input for all staff on areas such as differentiation and co-teaching will support ongoing improvements.

4. THE STRUCTURES IN PLACE TO FOSTER INCLUSION, EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF ALL STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- The establishment of the Loft and the Den as base classes for students with ASD in 2012 showed the school’s commitment to its core principles of inclusion and respect for diversity. A number of graduates of these classes have had exceptional success in their subsequent studies and the school is keen to continue promoting equality of opportunity for all students.
- Students with SEN have access to all programmes and activities within the school. All subjects are provided in mixed ability classes, except Maths and Irish, which are streamed from second year. A small core team of dedicated teachers co-ordinate supports, and, backed up by a warm and welcoming team of SNAs, provide a vital source of assistance in dealing with the daily issues that arise.
- Effective transition procedures for incoming first-year students are in place and almost all parents reported that the school managed their child's transition well and responded quickly and appropriately when difficulties arose.
- The guidance counsellor and the SET are reviewing practice in relation to assessment and the use of data to inform teaching and learning. The school is encouraged to consider developing a tracking system which combines the use of baseline data with the results of attainment tests taken at intervals during the students’ pathway through school. This data can be used
constructively to inform decisions about individual student needs as well as planning early intervention, whole-class or whole school programmes.

- Strategy cards drawn up by the SET provide some information to teachers on individual diagnoses and needs. More detailed plans are in place for some students and are available to teachers so that lesson planning can be informed by individual needs and targets. A systematic team approach needs to be developed so that all students with additional needs have plans which inform strategic lesson planning by teachers. The views of students and parents should be included in developing and reviewing these plans. Within this system collaboration between the support team and mainstream teachers should enable sharing of highly effective practice.

- The board of management should ensure that the school’s policies, including the Admissions Policy and the SEN policy, are reviewed in order to ensure full alignment with the principles of the new model of SEN provision.

- The Den and the Loft operate an open door policy and it is very positive that some students who are not enrolled in these classes visit the classes and share the facilities. In some cases students from the mainstream join the lessons of the Loft. Teachers and SNAs promote this reverse integration and are keen to explore ways to develop this further.
THE INSPECTORATE’S QUALITY CONTINUUM

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate’s quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school’s provision of each area.

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<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example of descriptive terms</th>
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<td><strong>Very Good</strong></td>
<td><em>Very good</em> applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is <strong>outstanding</strong> and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.</td>
<td>Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary</td>
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<td><strong>Good</strong></td>
<td><em>Good</em> applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of students’ learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <strong>very good</strong> standard.</td>
<td>Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement</td>
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<td><strong>Satisfactory</strong></td>
<td><em>Satisfactory</em> applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a <strong>better</strong> standard.</td>
<td>Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas</td>
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<td><strong>Fair</strong></td>
<td><em>Fair</em> applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.</td>
<td>Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on students’ learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve</td>
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<td><strong>Weak</strong></td>
<td><em>Weak</em> applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.</td>
<td>Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;</td>
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