An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Drogheda ABACAS Special School,
Fair St., Drogheda, Co. Louth
Uimhir rolla: 20374G

Date of inspection: 2 April 2014

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Drogheda ABACAS Special School in April 2014. 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 other members of staff, meetings 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.

Drogheda ABACAS Special School is a co-educational special school for students with autism under the patronage of Autism Ireland. Many of the 18 students enrolled in the school have complex behaviours alongside their autism. Attendance levels among the students at the time of the evaluation were very good overall.

In 2010, the school was granted temporary recognition by the Department of Education and Skills as a special school for children with autism. It has now applied for permanent recognition.

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

- This is a highly effective special school for students with autism in which the provision made for every student is very good.
- The leadership and management of the school are of a very high standard.
- A child-centred ethos was very strongly in evidence during the evaluation.
- The commitment of all members of staff to working in close collaboration, in order to most effectively meet the needs of the students, is exemplary.
- A range of appropriate strategies is being used very effectively to address the triad of impairments associated with autism.
- There is very good partnership between the school and the parents.
- Learning and teaching in the school are very good. There is significant progression evident in students' learning outcomes.
- The work of the team of special needs assistants (SNAs) and the quality of additional supports in supporting students' full access to education are very good.
- The management of complex behaviours is very good.
- The quality of preparation for learning and teaching is very good.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- The parents' association should consider becoming affiliated to the National Parents' Council – Primary (NPC-P).
- How large-format books are used to develop students' understanding of language could be augmented to include stories that document and celebrate students' own experiences and achievements.

- School-wide policy and practice in the use of photographic and video records to document students' achievements and progression in their learning should be developed.

Findings

1. The learning achievements of students

- The overall quality of the students' learning is very good. All students have access to a comprehensive curriculum that meets their needs. Excellent learning outcomes are achieved for all students in a range of subject areas. Very good attention is afforded to the development of key literacy and numeracy skills. The great emphasis on seeking to maximise communication and on how to relate mathematics to everyday experiences is highly commendable. Students engage in very beneficial numeracy activities and receive excellent opportunities to apply their mathematical skills in the community. Students demonstrate significant progression in their learning in both language and communication, and numeracy. In their questionnaires responses, all parents agreed that their child is doing well in school.

- During the evaluation, very high-quality learning experiences for students were observed in lessons in Social Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), Music, Visual Arts, Physical Education and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Students' engagement levels were very good. In SPHE, learning activities focus very well on developing students' sense of their own identity, their appreciation of others and their understanding of personal safety.

- The quality of learning in respect of the skills of independent living and of daily interaction in the community is excellent. Great care and attention are paid to ensuring these learning experiences are developed sequentially and transfer into students' ongoing behaviours and routines.

- The school has been prepared very carefully as a learning environment for students who have a wide range of complex learning needs. The quality of classroom display and the organisation of learning spaces are very good.

2. **Quality of teaching**

- The quality of teaching in the school is very high. All members of the staff work closely together to ensure that learning experiences are targeted very carefully to the needs of the students. The care and attention given to developing all students' language and communication skills are exemplary. Language and communication lessons are highly participative and receptive language is developing very skilfully. Effective explicit teaching develops students' social skills and empowers them to engage with others. All parents, in questionnaire responses, agreed that teaching is good in the school, that their child gets help from the teachers and special needs assistants when needed, and that their child's work is affirmed.

- A range of activities and approaches is used to develop functional literacy skills. Students experience story and reading through the use of individualised text and well-chosen large-format books. Work in this area is successful. To further support reading experiences, this could be expanded to include books that document and celebrate students' own experiences and achievements or that include them as participants in stories. The quality of the teaching of Mathematics is very good. Excellent use of resources and of experiences in the community characterises teaching of key mathematics skills.

- The quality of teaching of lessons observed in a broad range of other subjects was very good. All lessons observed were very well paced and structured and great care was taken to ensure they were stimulating and engaging for students. The quality of

practical preparation of resources for learning and teaching is worthy of great commendation.

- The quality of the school's individual education plan (IEP) preparation process and the plans that are prepared are very good. Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed targets, based on high-quality baseline assessment data, are outlined for implementation.

3. **Support for students' well-being**

- The quality of the management of the students and the quality of pastoral care in the school are very good. The assiduous attention given to meeting all students' individual care and educational needs is worthy of the highest commendation.

- The special needs assistants, who form the support team of the school, have a very clear understanding of the learning and care needs of the students. The quality of the work of the team is very good and their engagement with students is very commendable. A great commitment to continuous professional development is demonstrated. During the evaluation, the members expressed a desire for more training to be convened within the school for all who engage with the students, with interest expressed in learning how to understand students' underlying medical conditions and general health and safety considerations. A small amount of frustration was expressed about how new or substitute staff members are prepared currently for the context of the school and the learners, and about the need for some more consistency in adhering to timetables during the school day. The school should find this information valuable in its ongoing reflection and self-evaluation.

- High-quality functional analysis of behaviour and data collection systems are features of the very valuable practice in the school. The individual behaviour plans for all students are of a very high standard. The targeted interventions and monitoring practice that result are based strongly on a careful and very thorough consideration of objective evidence.

- Students' awareness of each other is fostered very effectively through a range of positive and highly structured social learning activities and through a consistent use of participative learning approaches during lessons. All parents agreed that the school helps their child to interact with others.

- The quality of home-school partnerships is very good. The parents' association is not affiliated currently to the National Parents' Council – Primary (NPC-P). It is recommended that consideration be given to affiliation. All parents, in their questionnaire responses, agreed that the school provides a safe environment for their child, they trust the school to deal fairly with concerns, the school welcomes parents and there is good communication between the school and the home. A very high percentage of parents strongly agreed that they are happy overall with the school.

- 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 school has a committed board of management which has a very clear understanding of its role and responsibilities. It acts effectively in accordance with established procedures to support the operation of the school. All of the parents who completed a questionnaire as part of the evaluation agreed that they knew about the work the board is doing for the school.

- The complex school environment is led and managed very effectively. The leadership of the principal is of a very high standard. She places a strong emphasis on leading learning and has a very clear understanding of students' needs. All of the parents, who completed a questionnaire as part of the evaluation, agreed that the school is well run. The commitment of the in-school management team to the effective operation of the school was very clearly in evidence during the evaluation.

- The school is located in temporary accommodation, where the staff has been successful in maximising its use for students' learning. It is noted that the acoustic and sensory profiles of this building are not appropriate to the needs of students with autistic spectrum disorders. A significant percentage of parents disagreed that facilities are good in the school. The anticipated move to a permanent school building should address concerns in this area.

5. **School Self-evaluation**

- A range of excellent assessment tools is used effectively. Assessment data is analysed carefully and used very well to inform planning for teaching and learning. Findings are shared productively with parents. To contribute to its assessment, the school should consider extending photographic recording as a school-wide policy and use photographic and video records to document students' achievements and the progression in their learning. The school should also place a greater focus on recording students' achievement of curricular objectives in the different subjects of the curriculum in monthly progress records.

- The school demonstrates strong commitment to ongoing reflection and to the interrogation of verifiable evidence to set targets for improvement.

Conclusion

The school's capacity to develop further and to engage in school improvement is very good.

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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 Drogheda ABACAS Special School welcomes the findings of our WSE report. We are very pleased that the findings reflect accurately the current quality of teaching & learning in the school. The Board of Management also acknowledges the very high level of satisfaction indicated by parents in the parent questionnaires.

The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the challenges that are faced by the teaching staff on a daily basis in relation to our current premises spread over 3 floors and the difficulties which arise from having classrooms split between 2 and 3 separate classrooms and the impact this can have on occasion adhering to timetabling. We are moving to our new premises in September with each class having its own classroom.

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 main recommendations made in the report.

- The parents association has become a member of the National Parents Council – Primary NPC-P

- While large format books are in use throughout the school it has been decided to expand on the use of such books to further enhance the teaching & learning of our students.

- We have begun the process of drawing up school wide policy to expand the current level of photographic and video records to document student's achievements and progression.