An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs
REPORT

Mercy Secondary School
Tralee, County Kerry
Roll number: 68070E

Date of inspection: 6 December 2011

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	**5 and 6 December 2011**
Inspection activities undertaken • Review of relevant documents • Discussion with principal and teachers • Discussion with special needs assistants • Interaction with students	• Observation of teaching and learning during eleven class periods • Observation of extra- and co-curricular activities • Examination of students' work • Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was very good, with excellent practice frequently witnessed.
- All students have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. There are very good structures in place that are responsive and flexible in meeting students' needs and maximising students' strengths.
- The school engages in many activities that promote inclusive learning and recognises the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement.
- Policies and practices are student-centred with good lines of communication evident among staff.
- Continuing professional development is a central feature of the school's improvement agenda and some teachers have shown considerable leadership in this regard.
- The hard working, reflective and effective team of teachers qualified in special education is central to the school's success in providing meaningful and personalised learning.
- While there are some areas that merit attention, in particular those relating to timetabling, senior management have a clear understanding of their role and their leadership supports the inclusive practices and self-review undertaken in the school.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The key role of the mainstream teacher requires that ongoing attention is given to issues relating to assessment, learning and teaching, and to building capacity among all teachers through formal and informal learning opportunities.
- While additional resources are used for the purposes intended, there are currently too many teachers involved in the delivery of these resources. Renewed attention to timetabling issues and the place of team-teaching in the provision for special educational needs is recommended.

- It is recommended that the existing good practices associated with assessment of students' ability and progress be further developed through a range of qualitative and quantitative activities.

INTRODUCTION

The school engages with the diversity of learners enrolled by providing a range of suitably diverse responses. Teachers demonstrate a palpable desire to do what is best for their students and individual and collective self-review is the norm. The recommendations in this report are well within the remit of the school and many echo those already highlighted by the school's own self-review.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- A total of eleven lessons were observed over the course of the two-day inspection. Lessons focused on a range of learning outcomes including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, and curriculum-related learning goals associated with English, Mathematics, History, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and modules associated with the school's Transition Year (TY) Programme.

- Classes ranged in size from individual and small group withdrawal to whole-class teaching and team-teaching. The school has made tentative and successful steps with regard to implementing team-teaching, where two teachers work in the classroom at the same time. This latter use of additional resources is very much in keeping with DES policy and it is recommended that the school examine how such good practice can be extended.

- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was very good, with some excellent practice observed. Lessons were conducted in a manner that attended to students as individuals and good rapport was evident between teachers and students in the lessons observed. Teachers' knowledge of their students, and of the lesson content, contributed to the quality of the learning experienced by students. At all times teachers were seen to have high, but realistic, expectations of their students and this contributed to the creation of an atmosphere that challenged and motivated learners.

- All lessons were well-organised and well-paced. Some teachers differentiated for students' abilities by setting different tasks or by responding in appropriately different ways to students' efforts. Teachers sometimes personalised the learning by the manner in which they consciously framed questions and responded to students' answers and requests. In the larger classes a minority of teachers availed of cooperative learning opportunities to provide individual and small group teaching.

- Further examination by teachers of the place of cooperative learning, both formal and informal, merits consideration as does attention to the level of student accountability and participation when engaged in such tasks. Students appeared comfortable in asking questions of their teachers, reflecting the safe and respectful atmosphere of the lessons, but there was little evidence of students being given an opportunity to ask questions of one another.

- The school is proactive and innovative in its promotion of learning opportunities for all students. Formal peer support in the form of paired-reading and paired-mathematics between transition-year and first-year students is one such example, as are the successful lunchtime activities. Equally of note is the fourth year programme that focuses on positive psychology and on learning how to learn. In some lessons, student learning was also advanced by encouraging students to engage in reflective practice and to self-evaluate their own learning.

- The school has invested in a range of appropriate resources, including computer software packages. Learning could be further supported through minor additional investments in some printers and software which would facilitate students sharing their work with one another and, where deemed appropriate, the wider school community. Efforts to use graphic organisers as visual frameworks were occasionally seen. In this regard, further use of information communication and technology (ICT), to develop such good work, will have the added advantage of students being facilitated to use ICT while taking ownership of their work.

- It is recommended that the school examine how aspects of learning and teaching, as identified above could form part of the staff handbook. The school's innovative teachers' council could also be a means to disseminate and discuss these pedagogical issues such as framing questions, responding to students' responses (feedback), cooperative learning, team-teaching, graphic organisers, and self-evaluation as learning. Similarly attention could also be given to the use of assistive technology, displaying students' work and to how teachers form decisions regarding the use and sequence of competitive, cooperative, collective and individual tasks for students.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- The school is responsive, flexible and thoughtful in its engagement with learners and their learning. The school strives to be inclusive in both its policies and practices, recognising the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement.

- The additional teaching hours and other resources, including those associated with the special needs assistants, are used for the purposes for which they are intended. The good work of the special needs assistants and their contribution to allowing students to access, participate and benefit from all facets of school life is duly acknowledged by this report. However, the number of teachers currently deployed to avail of these additional hours, which equate to nearly ten whole-teacher equivalents, is too large. At the time of the inspection it was calculated that sixty-one teachers were involved in such provision. To avoid any unintentional fragmentation of provision, and the less than optimum use of resources, requires that the school should address this timetabling issue as a matter of priority.

- To assist in ensuring optimum use of supports and resources for learning, the school's innovative electronic tracking system contributes to a student register, where attendance, assessment, individualised plans and learning outcomes can be monitored and tracked against the mode of additional support provided, and the personnel involved.

- The teachers with recognised qualifications in special education, and those teachers involved in co-ordinating provision, are central to the school's success in meeting diverse needs through a range of diverse and interconnected responses. The quality of the questions teachers have asked of each other through self-review, and through engagement with the inspection process reveals the reflective and professional approach adopted by the core-team of teachers.

- These teachers, and many of their mainstream colleagues, correctly recognise the mainstream teacher as a key agent in providing for inclusive learning in the school. Continuing professional development is well advanced in the school. Ongoing work at whole-school level, year-group level, subject-department level and individual level is both acknowledged and further encouraged by this report. The core-team of qualified staff can play a key role in promoting, not only context-sensitive professional development for colleagues, but also assist colleagues with the transfer of such knowledge into classroom practice.

- Students have access to a broad and balanced curriculum with teachers alert to any danger of students' career choices being foreclosed by lack of access to modern languages. The school's own review process has begun to examine if additional support can be provided earlier to those students in first year that may have significant needs in relation to their literacy and/or numeracy skills. The possible use of team-teaching merits consideration in this regard.

- The school recognises the supports that students such as those with English as an additional language (EAL) and/or those exceptionally able and gifted may require. The school's well-constructed *Special Needs Policy / Inclusion Policy* offers another means of promoting inclusive learning through documenting the actions the school takes for all identified groups and by disseminating pedagogical practices as outlined above. As noted by teachers, these good teaching practices transfer across all groups and are applicable to all learners.

- Good internal lines of communication are mirrored by similar experiences with representatives of relevant external agencies. Significant efforts have been made to advance individualised planning for students including the use of ICT to engage with individualised education plans (IEPs). Given the size of the school, it may be beneficial to focus, as a priority, additional efforts regarding IEPs, among those students presenting with low-incidence needs. In keeping with good practice, the voice of students, parents as well as the observations and actions of teachers and special needs assistants can inform the composition and review of such plans.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Early and co-ordinated contact is made with the relevant primary schools and this work, combined with good relationships with personnel from external agencies, adds to the quality of planning and preparation.

- The school's enrolment policy reads easily and outlines in detail the procedures involved. However, reference to enrolment for students with special educational needs being contingent upon resources and reference to the subsequent possibility that it may "*be necessary for the Board of Management to defer attendance*" is not in keeping with

legislation and does not reflect the school's inclusive practice as witnessed during the course of the inspection.

- The core team of qualified staff have a variety of skills and talents across a range of subject areas which facilitate student learning, including literacy and numeracy development. Given the large size of the school, these teachers have shown admirable skill in planning, preparing and communicating with colleagues. The core team can play a variety of key roles in promoting further developments in literacy and numeracy including engagement with their subject departments. Their leadership, as seen through their engagement with one another, with other teaching colleagues and with special needs assistants, is a significant strength of the school.

- Appropriate assessments are used to inform decisions relating to students identified with special educational needs. The school's focus on literacy and numeracy development will be informed by these and other standardised tests and by the expertise among staff qualified in the area of special education.
- The testing and re-testing of students' literacy and numeracy skills, as represented by reading and mathematical ages, can be supported and interpreted by the core-team of qualified teachers. The work of some teachers with the Learning School Project and numeracy development augurs well in this regard.

- As discussed with teachers and senior management, there are some areas of assessment that the school should regard as augmenting the existing good work. More nuanced and intermediate assessment practices such as work samples, surveying students' beliefs and attitudes through questionnaires, classroom observation schedules and case studies should be considered as should the manner in which such findings can be disseminated to colleagues so as to inform teaching and improve learning.

- Participation and achievement in state examinations are rightfully a source of pride for all concerned. In consultation with the local National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist, the school adopts a systematic approach to arranging reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE). Students are facilitated, where possible, in becoming familiar with the relevant accommodation provided. While the bar of expectation is set high, it is noted that the school also recognises in equal measure both student attainment and achievement.

- The use of the staff handbook to promote inclusive practices and to maintain clarity around roles, and evolving roles, of school personnel may prove beneficial. This may be particularly applicable to documenting the key roles and actions of the mainstream teacher and those of the special needs assistants.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

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