**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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| **Ainm na scoile / School name** | St. Muredach's College |
| **Seoladh na scoile / School address** | Sligo Road<br>Ballina<br>Co. Mayo |
| **Uimhir rolla / Roll number** | 64510J |

## Date of inspection: 23-01-2020

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

## 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
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

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| **Date of inspection** | 21 – 23 January 2020 |
| **Inspection activities undertaken**<br>• Discussion with principal and teachers<br>• Meeting with SEN team<br>• Meeting with parents of students with additional and special educational needs<br>• Review of relevant documents | • Analysis of parent questionnaires<br>• Observation of teaching and learning<br>• Examination of students' work<br>• Interaction with students<br>• Student group discussion<br>• Feedback to principal and teachers |

**SCHOOL CONTEXT**

St. Muredach's College is an all-boys' post-primary school, with a current enrolment of 360 students. The school operates under the trusteeship of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Killala, and students are drawn from the town of Ballina and surrounding areas. The school has an additional teaching allocation of 3.96 full-time teachers or 87.12 teaching hours per week, to provide additional supports for students identified with special educational needs (SEN). The school has one special-needs assistant (SNA).

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**FINDINGS**

- The quality of learner outcomes for students with special educational needs (SEN) was satisfactory overall, with significant variation ranging from highly effective to fair.
- The quality of learner experiences was good overall, with significant variation ranging from less than satisfactory to very good.
- Despite some efforts to bring practice in line with circular 14/2017 the management and use of resources require improvement; only half of the additional teaching hours allocated to the school are currently deployed specifically to support students with SEN.
- Systems of communication between teachers, parents and students are not sufficiently supporting individualised planning, and lessons are not underpinned sufficiently by effective planning to meet individual needs.
- Teachers are mostly very supportive of students with SEN but there is a need to build capacity amongst staff so that inclusive practices can be further developed.
- Some positive steps have been taken to improve the structures in place to support inclusion, equality of access and the holistic development of students; there remains a need to further develop inclusive practices to promote the full participation of students with additional or special educational needs in the life of the school.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The board of management, together with senior leadership, should ensure that the additional teaching hours given to the school to support students with additional needs are used solely for their intended purpose and that all practice complies with circular letter 0014/2017 and the associated *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*.
- The establishment of a core team of teachers who plan for and deliver the supports to students should be prioritised, so that effective planning to meet the needs of students with SEN can be realised.

- Systems of planning and communication should be reviewed so that interventions targeted at meeting individual needs can be informed by effective communication between students, parents and teachers.
- In order to optimise learner outcomes and experiences, teachers should consider students' identified priority learning needs and targets and employ differentiated teaching strategies that provide appropriate challenge and facilitate success.
- Management should prioritise continuing professional development (CPD) for the core SEN team, for management and for mainstream teachers so that inclusive practices such as co-teaching can be introduced and practices such as differentiation and the use of active learning methodologies can be further developed.

## DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

The quality of learning outcomes was satisfactory overall, with significant variation ranging from very good to fair.

In all lessons, students showed a positive approach to their classwork and were generally well motivated to learn. Behaviour was very good, although in many lessons students tended to be quiet and reticent, making it difficult at times to assess the extent to which they were able to reflect on learning, or manage and support their own learning. When given opportunities, students demonstrated skills in self-regulation and reflection and they were curious and open-minded about the opinions of others.

Some very good outcomes were noted where students had a clear understanding of the learning intentions, where they worked enthusiastically and purposefully toward a shared goal, where they made connections with real-life situations and where they clearly enjoyed interacting positively with their peers in order to progress learning. In some effective lessons, students were observed developing skills in organising their learning and they were skilfully supported to take responsibility for managing their tasks.

Where outcomes were less successful, there was a need for a greater range of teaching approaches aimed at optimising engagement and making the learning more accessible to the students. In a significant number of mainstream lessons, the imbalance between teacher talk and student activity or discussion meant that students sat passively and received information rather than being actively engaged in the learning. This resulted in lower levels of understanding and skill development.

At times, learning outcomes were limited by lesson content which was not underpinned by clear learning intentions matched with students' priority learning needs. In some support lessons, students were given exercises which generally supported literacy development, but did not target their specific individual needs and, at times, there was insufficient challenge in the tasks set.

### 2. THE QUALITY OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The overall quality of learner experiences was good, with significant variation, ranging from fair to very good. Some aspects of learner experiences were very good; lessons were characterised by positive respectful interactions and a supportive atmosphere. Students generally demonstrated good levels of interest, co-operated very well, and clearly did not want to let their teachers down.

When presented with meaningful activities, students participated enthusiastically. In the most effective lessons, they were able to explain the purpose of the tasks. In some lessons, they contributed their opinions and experiences to class discussions with confidence and there was a sense of partnership in dealing with the tasks. At times, they took ownership of and responsibility for their work and were able to reflect upon it and improve it.

However, students were generally passive in a significant number of lessons and the tasks set for them were textbook or worksheet exercises which they mostly worked on individually, supported by the teacher. In some cases, the main emphasis was on getting the work finished and there were missed opportunities to optimise engagement by presenting content in a variety of ways, or by setting tasks which required students to collaborate, reflect, or tease something out. In many lessons, there was little meaningful reflection on learning and a sense of achievement was limited.

Insufficient checking for understanding was a feature of a significant number of lessons. Some teachers used questioning skilfully to elicit knowledge, include students, promote understanding or affirm achievement. However, questioning was mainly global in other lessons and often required single-word answers from the students. Some written formative feedback was observed in a small number of instances but it was not widespread.

Some teachers differentiated their questioning according to the varying levels of attainment of their students. However, there was little differentiation of learning intentions, of tasks set, of homework or of assessment. Teachers should consider how differentiation strategies can support learning at various levels and facilitate appropriate challenge for all. Specific CPD may be helpful in this regard.

## 3. THE MANAGEMENT AND USE OF RESOURCES RECEIVED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The management and use of resources received to support students with SEN requires improvement.

In the recent past, there has been some strategic planning to improve the deployment of the additional teaching hours and bring practice in line with circular 14/2017. However, at the time of the evaluation only about half of the available teaching hours were being used to provide supports specifically for students with SEN. The remainder were used to provide mainstream lessons, or they were scheduled as planning and administration time. This situation requires urgent attention. The teaching allocation for SEN should be used to provide additional teaching supports to students with identified additional needs rather than to provide mainstream lessons. Planning time should be kept to a minimum.

Most of the teaching staff are involved in the delivery of a small number of support lessons. There is one dedicated special education teacher, and co-ordination and planning are carried out by this teacher, senior management, the guidance counsellor and a staff member with responsibility for co-ordination of SEN. Provision takes the form of withdrawal for small-group or one-to-one lessons, and group provision at Irish lesson times for those who are exempt. Currently, no co-teaching is in place.

Currently, one teacher prepares student support files for students who have professional reports. This teacher makes information available to teachers and sometimes advises teachers on how to plan for their support lessons. Within the existing student support files, the identification of priority learning needs and targets requires development so that targets are specific and can facilitate progress and a sense of achievement for all students.

Most of the planning time goes to staff who deliver few or no support lessons. There is a fundamental need to build capacity and establish a core team of teachers who deliver most of the supports for students. This team should share the individualised planning which informs the deployment of resources. For all students with identified needs, there is a need to develop student support files in which relevant data is gathered, including ability and attainment test data and screening information

from teachers. Informed by the views of parents and the students themselves, this information can then be used to identify priority learning needs and specific targets for each student which can be shared with mainstream teachers in a way that is accessible to teachers and useful to them in their lesson planning.

Parents and students reported little or no awareness of plans or targets. Updates on progress take the form of the school report and the parent-teacher meeting. While most students reported that help is always available and that teachers are generally very supportive, parents reported that it is not easy to communicate with staff regarding their concerns. In the establishment of the core team, consideration should be given to setting up effective systems of communication both with parents and with mainstream teachers. It is positive that plans to make relevant information available to teachers on a secure online platform are underway; this should be progressed as a matter of urgency.

Effective transition procedures for incoming first-year students include visits to feeder schools, open days, pre-entry assessment and a Transition Year mentoring programme in the first weeks of secondary school. Most parents reported that the school managed their child's transition well. Some students reported that transition was difficult, but that they were supported well by the staff and that they felt well looked after.

## 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 school has taken positive steps towards transitioning to the new model of provision for students with additional needs. Both members of senior management and one staff member have accessed CPD on the new model and are aware of the need to fully transition towards this more inclusive approach. One teacher liaises regularly with the Special Education Support Service. Whole-staff CPD on dyslexia was provided last year and was well received. Some teachers reported that they were keen to access more training so that they would be better placed to support students in mainstream and support classes. It is recommended that CPD on differentiation, on co-teaching and on various categories of need be prioritised for staff.

Students with additional or special educational needs have access to all school programmes and activities. In the focus group, students reported that their teachers are very supportive and that they get good help and encouragement with their academic work. It was evident that teachers wanted to look after students and affirmation was a feature of all lessons observed.

While encouragement was plentiful, support mainly focused on academic achievement with little targeted focus on developing self-management skills or addressing social or behavioural needs. New courses in Behavioural, Emotional and Social Support and Social Education have been put on for junior cycle and it is positive that these areas are being addressed in the whole-class setting. Nevertheless, there were some instances where targeted interventions to support inclusion, participation and social development of some students were lacking. Systems for identification of students who need support should be reviewed so that a broader range of developmental areas are considered.

The SEN policy is being updated currently and it is planned that the admissions policy will be updated in line with the new model of provision. The board of management should ensure that the One-to-One policy is also reviewed in order to ensure full alignment with best practice in child protection.

**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 of quality the school's provision of each area.

| Level | Description | Example of descriptive terms |
|---|---|---|
| **Very Good** | ***Very good*** 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 ***outstanding*** and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision. | 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 |
| **Good** | ***Good*** 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 *very good* standard. | Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement |
| **Satisfactory** | ***Satisfactory*** 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 better standard. | Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas |
| **Fair** | ***Fair*** 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. | Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on students' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve |
| **Weak** | ***Weak*** 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. | Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties; |