



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs in post-primary schools

Report

REPORT

Ainm na scoile/School name	Our Lady Of Mercy College
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Beaumont Dublin 9
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	60870T
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	19/09/2024
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/ Date of issue of report	20/11/2024

What is an evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs?

The Evaluation of Inclusive Practices and Provision for Children with Special and Additional Educational Needs is a focused evaluation of provision for students with special and additional educational needs in mainstream post-primary schools. As this inspection model places a particular emphasis on the quality of learner outcomes for students with special and additional 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 special and additional educational needs under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

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

Actions of the school to safeguard children and prevent and tackle bullying

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection and anti-bullying procedures were conducted:	
<i>Child Protection</i>	<i>Anti-bullying</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">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 mandated persons.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The school has developed an anti-bullying policy that meets the requirements of the <i>Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013)</i> or <i>Bí Cineálta (2024)</i> and this policy is reviewed annually.2. The school's current anti-bullying policy is published on its website and/or is readily accessible to board of management members, teachers, parents and students.

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.

Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs

Date of inspection	17/09/2024-19/09/2024
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussion with principal and teachers• Meeting with SEN team• Meeting with parents of students with special and additional educational needs• Review of relevant documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis of parent questionnaires• Observation of teaching and learning• Examination of students' work• Interaction with students• Student group discussion• Meeting with special needs assistants• Feedback to principal and teachers

School context

Our Lady of Mercy College, Beaumont is a voluntary secondary school that has an enrolment of 383 girls. Originally established by the Sisters of Mercy, the school is now under the trusteeship of CEIST-Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. The school provides the Junior Cycle, Leaving Certificate (Established), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and an optional Transition Year (TY). At the time of the evaluation, an additional 75 hours or 3.4 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTE), an additional 5.5 hours or 0.25 on projected enrolment and two special-needs assistants (SNAs) were allocated to the school to provide additional supports to students with special educational needs (SEN). There was also an additional 1.00 WTE allocated for supporting the needs of students for whom English is an additional language (EAL).

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- The quality of learning outcomes of students with additional and special educational needs was good; students made progress with their learning in the majority of lessons observed.
- The school community was responding well to meeting the rapidly growing cultural diversity of the school population.
- The quality of learning experiences was good overall; in the majority of lessons observed, students were supported to succeed within a positive learning environment.
- The management and use of resources received to support students with additional and special educational needs was good; allocated hours were appropriately timetabled to provide additional supports to students, mainly through team teaching.
- There was a high level of commitment to providing for the holistic development of all students and to promoting and fostering a climate of inclusion and equality of opportunity for all learners.
- The school provided a wide range of extra-curricular activities that all students could access.

Recommendations

- Teachers, led by the SEN co-ordinators, should in consultation with students and parents, devise a strategy for subtly differentiating homework for students as appropriate, to support them in managing the amount of time spent on homework each evening.
- The SEN team should further involve students and their parents in creating and updating student support plans. These plans should include the setting and reviewing of

- learning targets that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based (SMART) and should be used to inform mainstream teachers' planning.
- Senior management should engage with the support services to provide further relevant teacher professional learning (TPL) for all teachers in the area of team-teaching and EAL to strengthen the current delivery of in-class support to students

Detailed findings and recommendations

1. The quality of learning outcomes of students with special and additional educational needs

The quality of learning outcomes of students with additional and special educational needs was good; students made progress with their learning in the majority of lessons observed.

Teachers set high expectations for students. Students were motivated and engaged well with lesson content, showing a genuine interest in the subject material being covered. In a few lessons observed, teachers endeavoured to present tasks in a novel and fun way, which students appeared to enjoy.

Overall, classroom management was effective. In the main, teachers organised the hour-long lessons well and the time was used efficiently. In a few lessons observed, there was scope for improved scheduling of tasks to fill the full lesson. Lessons should be planned for the full hour and encompass engaging activities throughout. Teachers should also minimise the use of worksheets during class as these could potentially be given for homework.

In almost all lessons observed, there was evidence of prior learning and progression of new learning. In-class assessment was effective when teachers assessed students' comprehension through lower-order and higher-order questions and planned appropriately for incremental learning. Progress was checked at the end of some lessons. This good practice should be extended throughout all lessons.

In the effective practice observed, learning intentions were shared by the teacher in a student-friendly way to support learner awareness of what they were going to achieve by the end of the lesson. Teachers should collaborate on the use of clear learning intentions so that there is consistency of use in all lessons.

The SEN co-ordinators used various assessments, including standardised and regular subject assessments to effectively gauge the strengths of students and to identify areas of need. Subject teachers were also using in-class assessments and homework to ascertain students' comprehension. Copybooks were of a good standard. There was some evidence of teacher corrections in the sample of copybooks reviewed. There was scope for teachers to provide additional detail in the feedback provided to support student progression.

The school's demographic had changed considerably over the last year with the student population becoming more diverse. Within this changing landscape there was also sometimes movement of students in and out of the school at short notice. This level of rapid change resulted in a need for greater EAL support for students. The school community was responding well to meeting the rapidly growing cultural diversity of the school population. Senior management had recently secured some additional hours for EAL support. Students for whom English was an additional language received support while their peers were in Irish lessons. Students were assessed on their language proficiency within three weeks of starting school, which is good practice.

There was very good practice observed in EAL lessons. Students were responding well to the innovative teaching methods being used. There was scope for the lesson content to be more relevant to the language of school life. It is important going forward that priority areas for EAL support are identified and that students are supported with the language required to navigate school life through basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) development. Students

should also be supported with the language that they require in subject areas. This cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) should be prioritised during EAL support. Teachers should collaborate closely with the EAL teacher on what is being covered in subject lessons.

In discussions during the evaluation and in the reviewing of targets in student support plans, it was evident that homework was proving a significant concern for some students and their families. The main concern was around the length of time being spent on homework each evening. Strategies to address the issue of homework in student support plans did not seem to be impacting on reducing student stress regarding the completion of homework. The school's homework policy emphasised high expectations for all students and recognised the right of students with additional needs to participate fully in homework. To support the implementation of these commendable aspirations, further consultation is required with students and parents regarding strategies to support learners to manage the volume of homework received. It is recommended that teachers, led by the SEN co-ordinators, should in consultation with students and parents, devise a strategy for subtly differentiating homework for students as appropriate, to support them in managing the amount of time spent on homework each evening.

During some lessons, time was given to students to complete homework. This is not the most effective use of class time. Strategies around homework management will support teachers to use class time instead to address the specific priority learning needs of the students, such as literacy development. During focus group discussions, students reported that some of the strategies used to enhance spelling were not working for them. It is timely now to review, in consultation with students, the effectiveness of some of the school's DEIS plan strategies for literacy development.

2. The quality of learning experiences of students with special and additional educational needs

The quality of learning experiences was good overall; in the majority of lessons observed, students were supported to succeed within a positive learning environment.

Overall, teachers had planned appropriately for lessons and had the required materials prepared. Students benefitted from the subject knowledge and expertise of their teachers. Relevant information regarding students' needs was shared via the school's digital platform. In a sample of subject planning reviewed, there was some evidence of effective differentiation identified for supporting students with additional and special educational needs. This level of detail regarding differentiation should be extended to all subject plans.

Of the student support plans reviewed, some of the learning targets were of good quality and were SMART. Other targets were more general in nature, serving as procedures to put in place rather than as meaningful goals for the individual student. Targets should be specific and meaningful to the individual students and thus be more student-centred. Targets should also encompass, where relevant, areas of need regarding social and emotional wellbeing.

During the evaluation, it was evident that most parents and students were not aware of the existence of a student support plan. It is recommended that the SEN team should further involve students and parents in creating and updating student support plans. These plans should include the setting and reviewing of SMART learning targets. There is scope to enhance the link between learning targets from student support plans and mainstream subject teacher planning to strengthen collaborative planning. Students identifying their own targets will facilitate an increased understanding of the sometimes hidden needs of students. The strengthening of student participation and parental involvement complements the school's DEIS targets relating to student agency and parental partnership.

While the SEN co-ordinators were monitoring students' progress through various means, this progress was not recorded fully in the sample of student support plans reviewed. The SEN team should address this, through developing the strategies used to monitor and review student progress in each of their identified targets, in collaboration with students and their parents. Increased involvement will also enrich the communication between the school and parents regarding the additional support and accommodations their child is receiving in school.

The SEN co-ordinators had responded well to meeting some of the wellbeing needs of the students. There was a card system in place for students who may need a movement break during lessons or time to regulate if feeling overwhelmed. Students were aware of what teacher they could go to at any given time. This acknowledgement of how potentially stressful the school day can be for a young person with additional and special educational needs could be extended further to incorporate a more subtle system for presenting the card to the class teacher.

There was a recognised need, among students and staff, for a designated space within the school where students could go if they needed time to support self-regulation. This is a development priority for school management. Student anxiety around accessing their lockers was an identified area of need from student support plans. Students were facilitated to leave lessons early to access their lockers at a quieter time with the support of an SNA. This was a positive support for students. Commendably, students were given their homework in advance so they would not miss out. If possible, lockers for students who need support with accessing them should be located in a quieter space with a staff member present to support or check in with students if required. This would also facilitate students staying in class for the duration of the lesson.

3. The management and use of resources received to support students with special and additional educational needs

The management and use of resources received to support students with additional and special educational needs was good; allocated hours were appropriately timetabled to provide additional supports to students, mainly through team teaching.

Allocated hours were appropriately timetabled to provide additional supports to students. The main model of support was team teaching, which meant that for the majority of the time, students were learning alongside their peers in mixed-ability settings. The limited use of withdrawal also meant that students were not missing out on lessons for learning support. This is all good practice.

Teachers were very committed to supporting students with special educational needs. Team teaching enabled the sharing of good practice and expertise in supporting students with additional needs, thus building capacity among all teachers. During professional dialogue, as part of the evaluation process, teachers expressed the desire for additional relevant training to equip them to further meet the needs of students. To enhance collective practice in team teaching, teachers would benefit from external training on effective team teaching and the different team-teaching models. It is recommended that senior management should engage with the support services to provide further relevant teacher professional learning (TPL) for all teachers in the area of team teaching and EAL to strengthen the current delivery of in-class support to students.

There was a small core team of experienced SEN teachers in place, which is good practice, as it provides consistency for students and ensures that students with the greatest level of need are receiving the greatest level of support. Commendably, school management was facilitating another teacher in accessing further qualifications in supporting students with SEN, which will be a positive extension of the expertise of the team.

Senior management and the SEN co-ordinators linked appropriately with the relevant external agencies, such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to access support. The NEPS Continuum of Support was used effectively to identify and support students at the support levels of all, some and a few.

The SEN co-ordinators had effective links with local primary schools to access and share information, including the transition passport, to support the young person with their transition from primary to post-primary school. Senior management and the SEN team ran an Easter and

Summer camp this year to support students with EAL needs. A Transition Week was organised for all students at the start of the year. Visits to the school were also facilitated over the summer to support students with orientation. It emerged during discussions that all teachers may not have been fully aware of a young person's diagnosis in their first year of school. Subject teachers should ensure that they access information available on the school's shared drive regarding students' additional needs.

Some students were granted assistive technology (AT) to support them in accessing the curriculum and inclusion in the school day. There was a reluctance on the part of some students to use this AT regularly in school. Students were missing out on the benefits of using their designated AT as a result. Teachers were using portable technology school-wide at scheduled times to support learning. School staff should create initiatives to support the more widespread use of designated devices throughout the school by raising awareness of the benefits and positive aspects of using AT.

4. The structures in place to foster inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of all students with special and additional educational needs

There was a high level of commitment to providing for the holistic development of all students and to promoting and fostering a climate of inclusion and equality of opportunity for all learners.

The school's admission policy was inclusive in nature. The school's ethos was committed to holistic development and the achievement of the full potential of each student, particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalised. Commendably, senior management had organised events and activities to promote diversity and cultural representation, which reportedly were inspiring and positive events. There were student clubs in place that also promoted diversity and inclusion. This celebration of diversity should be showcased throughout the school on a regular basis.

There was a wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer for all students from catch-up clubs in the morning to lunchtime and after-school activities. All students were included in school trips and outings. Students reported varying levels of engagement with extra-curricular activities during focus groups. Senior management should seek student voice and opinion on what extra-curricular activities are working well.

Senior management had plans to start the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Programme in September 2025. This is a positive move towards supporting students with various pathways. Senior management and the SEN department should also carefully plan for options such as the Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP), at both junior and now senior cycle going forward, as there is scope to further develop procedures and planning for any student who is correctly identified for this programme. All L2LP provision should align with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines.

With a very new senior management team in place, there was positivity around building on existing structures and progressing and developing the school further. At the time of the evaluation, senior management and the board of management were reviewing their special educational needs policy. The draft policy was shared with parents and students, through the student council, to seek their input, which is good practice. To extend this good practice, senior management should review all relevant policies and subject planning with a lens of inclusion and equity for all to ensure the language used is reflective of a strengths-based model perspective, which emphasises students' strengths, interests and individuality, while also addressing areas of need.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal, the SEN co-ordinators and members of the core SEN team at the conclusion of the evaluation.

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.

Level	Description	Examples of descriptive terms
Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Excellent; exemplary; outstanding; exceptionally high standard; with very significant strengths
Very good	Provision that is very good is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.	Good; of good quality; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; strengths outweigh the shortcomings; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.	Fair; less than effective; less than sufficient; evident weaknesses that are impacting on learning; experiencing difficulty; shortcomings outweigh strengths; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard	Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for significant action to address the areas of concern.	Weak; poor; ineffective; insufficient; unacceptable; experiencing significant difficulties; serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated; requiring significant change, development and improvement to be effective