



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	Ashbourne Community School
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Deerpark Ashbourne Co Meath
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	91495T
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	11/04/2024
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/Date of issue of report	11/09/2024

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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

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	09/04/2024-11/04/2024
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

Ashbourne Community School is a co-educational post-primary school which operates under the joint patronage of Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB) and the Catholic Bishop of Meath. The school has a current enrolment of 1,095 students and provides the Junior Cycle, including the Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP), an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate (Established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The school opened a special class called Clann Ash in September 2023, which translated to 33 additional teaching hours. At the time of the evaluation, an additional 238.50 hours or 10.84 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTE) and 7 special-needs assistants (SNAs) were allocated to the school to provide additional supports to students identified with additional and special educational needs. There was also an additional 10 hours for supporting the needs of students for whom English is an additional language (EAL).

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- The quality of learner outcomes was very good. Most teachers had a very good understanding and knowledge of their students' learning needs.
- In the majority of lessons observed, learner experiences were very good and were underpinned by very positive teacher-student relationships.
- The management and use of resources to support students with special educational needs (SEN) was good. Students with the greatest level of need had access to the greatest level of support.
- The structures in place to support inclusion, equality and holistic development were good overall.
- A very dedicated and committed qualified core special education teacher (SET) team was in operation, led effectively by a SEN co-ordinator and a special class co-ordinator.
- The SEN co-ordinator and SET team had very strong partnerships with external agencies. This was of great benefit in developing and tailoring individual programmes of support for students.

Recommendations

- Subject teachers should plan further for differentiation in lessons and embed identified strategies at whole-school level to strengthen highly effective and differentiated teaching approaches.

- Senior management, in collaboration with the SEN co-ordinator, should work towards progressing the formation of a smaller SET teaching team to strengthen continuity of support and build capacity.
- To develop and strengthen inclusive practice, senior management and the SET department should reduce the practice of withdrawing students for L2LP provision to ensure that they are learning alongside their peers.

Detailed findings and recommendations

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

The quality of learner outcomes was very good. Most teachers had a very good understanding and knowledge of their students' learning needs.

Very good outcomes were observed where high-quality teacher planning and preparation for lessons was evident. Well-structured lessons were characterised by clearly identified learning outcomes and the use of relevant approaches to meet students' different learning needs. Students were very aware of what was expected of them. Student engagement and participation were of a high standard and learning outcomes were achieved when active listening activities were provided and when tasks built upon each other. In a small number of lessons, planning would have benefited from the incorporation of a greater degree of incremental learning, as well as the preparation of some additional materials to support learning progression and task completion.

In the very good lessons observed, teachers were aware of the importance of providing differentiated learning opportunities to students. Students who required additional support were enabled to achieve their potential as a result. A significant minority of lessons observed would have benefitted from more differentiation to support the diverse needs of learners. In a sample of subject planning reviewed, there was scope for teachers to add more detail to planning for differentiation. It is recommended that subject teachers should plan further for differentiation and embed identified strategies at whole-school level to strengthen highly effective differentiated teaching.

While the quality of in-class assessment was very good overall, there was scope to improve some aspects of assessment. In the very good lessons, teachers established prior learning and checked in at the end of the lesson for understanding. The level of challenge was pitched effectively, and students were challenged through the use of higher and lower-order questioning to ascertain understanding. Teachers deployed very good wait time for students to answer these questions. In a significant minority of lessons, teachers predominantly asked lower-order questions, and students provided brief answers with the teacher then expanding on the answer themselves. Teachers should develop and plan assessment strategies that appropriately challenge and encourage students to tease out problems and tease out solutions themselves, leading to improved learner outcomes.

In a sample of subject planning reviewed, planning for EAL students consisted of Oide resources, including a digital presentation on EAL support. The SEN department had created a bank of EAL online resources, which was all good practice. There was scope for more specific language targets within planning for EAL students, arising from timely assessment of students' proficiency in English.

During focus group discussions, students spoke very positively about lessons where they were active, as opposed to lessons where there was a predominance of note taking and teacher-led input. In a small number of lessons observed, there were opportunities for student voice to be extended to improve learner autonomy and to develop confidence and competence in oral communication. Teachers should be cognisant of this when planning for lessons.

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

In the majority of lessons observed, the quality of learner experiences was very good. Classroom interactions were underpinned by very positive teacher-student relationships.

The positive rapport apparent between staff and students contributed to a safe and secure learning environment for students. During focus group discussions, students spoke about the positive nature of in-class relationships. They described a holistic, supportive and caring environment that was conducive to learning. Teachers also made very good use of 'Check and Connect' time to link in with students.

In the majority of lessons observed, teachers assured students regularly that it was perfectly acceptable to make mistakes and that the process was as important as the end result. During focus groups, students stated that teachers created a safe space within which they could make mistakes. Students participated well in lessons, asking and answering questions freely. Teachers used a variety of ways to communicate content, from the use of technology to visual and concrete representations of materials, which appealed to different learners. Students reported that they had regular opportunities to work in pairs and in groups.

During the evaluation, it was noted that trends in attendance and punctuality were a cause of concern. Senior management and the SEN department were aware of the impact that these trends were having on students' learning experiences and were working on initiatives to promote attendance at a whole-school level.

Provision for students with exemptions from Irish was tailored to meet the changing needs of learners. As the group was large in size, senior management and the SEN department had responded innovatively to facilitating these students' needs.

The organisation and management of student copybooks and work in the main were good. In many of the additional support lessons, student work was completed on teacher-designed handouts or worksheets, which were collected and stored at the end of the lesson by the teacher. Teachers returned work to students at the end of a learning unit. While the school's rationale for this was clear, teachers should support students to take more ownership of their work and support them in managing their own records of learning.

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

The management and use of resources to support students with special educational needs was good. Students with the greatest level of need had access to the greatest level of support. All of the available additional teaching hours were scheduled to deliver support to students in line with the principles and actions outlined in the *Guidelines for Post Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs*.

The majority of the additional teaching hours were deployed in small group withdrawal. A very small minority was used for team-teaching. Aside from the core team, there was a large number of teachers delivering these additional teaching hours. This meant that teachers had only one or a very small number of support lessons on their timetables. It is timely now to reflect on and review this arrangement. It is recommended that senior management, in collaboration with the SEN co-ordinator, work towards progressing the formation of a smaller SET teaching team to strengthen continuity of support and build capacity. This team could then be provided with opportunities for ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL) in a manner which is sustainable and incremental. For instance, a focus of TPL inputs in the area of team teaching could help with the further development of team teaching throughout the school.

The continuum of support was used to identify students for targeted interventions, and student support files (SSFs) were in place for students at the 'few' and 'some' level of the continuum. Of

the SSFs reviewed, they were of a high-quality and very detailed in outlining students' areas of strength, and included strategies to support students' areas of need. In addition, the *At A Glance* document prepared by the team was an effective means of capturing that extensive information into a user-friendly guide for all subject teachers. Information on students' levels of abilities and subsequent targets were identified in collaboration with students and their parents. Parent surveys administered and the focus group discussion evidenced that for a small number of parents they were unclear about their child's individual learning plan. As the school is currently undertaking a review of their additional needs policy, it is advised that the policy includes clear information on the SSF process, as to when and if meetings are happening, and the mechanism for target review.

In accordance with very good practice, the school had adopted a flexible and collaborative approach to timetabling to facilitate the changing needs of students during the year and this was reflected in a model of withdrawal provision that was time-bound with targeted interventions. The school also used a 'lean in and lean out' approach to students accessing additional support. This good practice should be included in the school's additional needs policy to ensure that parents are aware of the system of support in place, as confusion regarding the operation of resource hours was reported by parents during the focus group discussion.

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

The structures in place to support inclusion, equality and holistic development were very good overall; however, a few aspects of provision require improvement to fully reflect the school's commitment to inclusion.

Senior management and the SET core team had successfully opened a special class, Clann Ash, within the last twelve months and the class was a valuable addition for the school community.

The school's admission policy, the existence of Clann Ash, and the schools' plans for further expansion of special classes demonstrated the school's commitment to inclusion and supporting students with additional needs in the local community. In addition, the school's inclusive ethos was reflected in the diversity of the student cohort and the number of students identified at the various levels of the continuum of support.

A very dedicated and committed qualified core special education teacher (SET) team was in operation, led effectively by a SEN co-ordinator and the special class co-ordinator. Students in Clann Ash and those receiving additional support were benefiting greatly from their expertise. As identified by the school during the evaluation, the expertise of the core team should be extended to the wider circle of teachers delivering additional support to students.

There was good collegiality and shared purpose and drive amongst the core team in supporting students as effectively as possible. The core team of special education teachers acted as 'anchor' teachers for each year group. This was very effective in providing holistic support for vulnerable students in accessing education. Senior management and the SET team fostered an open and reflective approach to supporting the structures of inclusive practice. This was demonstrated, for example, through the school's review of its additional needs policy.

The SEN co-ordinator and SET team demonstrated very strong partnerships with external agencies. This was of great benefit to students in developing and tailoring individual programmes of support for students. The team had an effective transition programme in place for incoming students. The SEN co-ordinator visited schools for individual meetings for complex cases. In addition to good links with parents, an induction booklet had been designed to support the transition of students and their families to the school. Senior management and the SET team ran a summer programme in 2023. Commendably, plans were in place to extend the programme to incoming first years in 2024. This will be of great benefit to students in their orientation of the school and for the SET team to have in place the necessary supports for

students commencing in September, including assistive technology and any staff training that may be required.

A small number of junior cycle students were engaging with the Level 2 Learning Programme. All students met the criteria for undertaking the L2LP and this decision was made with parental involvement. Plans were in place to document this informed parental consent formally. The school was in a period of transition regarding L2LP provision and had recently undertaken whole-school professional development to support teacher collaborative planning.

At the time of the evaluation, the majority of L2LP provision was delivered by the core SET team in withdrawal classes. Teachers sent home additional L2LP reports to parents at the end of each academic year, alongside the standard report, which was an effective means of communicating progress. To develop and strengthen inclusive practice, it is recommended that senior management and the SET department should reduce the practice of withdrawing students for L2LP provision to ensure that they are learning alongside their peers.

Teachers gave generously of their time in providing a wide range of extra-curricular activities at break times and after school. Most parents surveyed and communicated with during the evaluation were positive about the inclusive nature of the school and commended the efforts that the school made to provide a caring environment for their children.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principals, the SEN co-ordinator, the special class co-ordinator and members of the core SET 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