



Stepping Stones

Educating children with autism

Inspectorate's Report



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An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning REPORT

Stepping Stones Special School

Harristown, Kilcloon, Co. Meath

Roll Number: 20379Q

Date of inspection: 11 June 2014

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Stepping Stones Special School, Harristown, Co. Meath in June 2014. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the school, interaction with pupils and review of their work, meetings with the principal and with board and parents' representatives, completed parents' questionnaires and a selection of school documents. The board of management of the school 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.

Stepping Stones Special School is a co-educational special school under the patronage of Autism Ireland. The school provides for pupils with a primary diagnosis of autism and complex needs. At the time of this evaluation there were thirty pupils enrolled and attendance was very good. In 2011 the school was granted temporary recognition by the Department of Education and Skills and has now applied for permanent recognition.

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

- very impressive shared leadership is in evidence across the school and this facilitates the provision of a high quality service to the pupils.
- the board of management has proactively managed the growth and development of the school over many years.
- the principal, in-school management team and director collaborate very effectively in the good management of the school.
- within a whole-school approach, the class teams of teachers and special needs assistants and the behaviour support team collaborate effectively to ensure that pupils' individual learning needs are addressed appropriately.
- a good range of child-centred, autism-specific approaches is implemented carefully in each classroom.
- the pupils' holistic learning needs are identified, prioritised and addressed systematically, and monitored through their well-planned individualised education programmes.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- in accordance with the needs of individual pupils, further opportunities to support pair and group interaction should be explored in classroom and recreational settings to extend pupils' social and communication skills.
- a time-frame for the phased progression and review of whole-school planning should be set out by the in-school management team.

- building on existing good links with local mainstream schools, opportunities to promote inclusive learning experiences for pupils should, as far as is practicable, be further developed.

Findings

1. The learning achievements of pupils

- Good achievement in pupils' learning is evident in all classrooms. The consistent and systematic tracking of pupils' learning indicates development and progress across a range of areas. Pupils are enabled to acquire a variety of behaviours that facilitates their participation in a broad range of learning and curricular activities.
- In language and literacy, pupils develop skills to communicate their needs and to interact with peers and staff members. The approach to reading and writing incorporates an appropriate emphasis on the social and functional aspects of literacy.
- Pupils are enabled to engage purposefully in the area of numeracy, and there is a suitable emphasis on linking activities to the practical application of skills through planned activities in the community and in accessing local amenities.
- Pupils' learning is supported through the use of assessment information across key developmental areas. Formative and summative assessment, including classroom observation, recorded data and standardised materials are employed systematically in developing pupils' programmes.
- There is a good emphasis on the development of pupils' life-skills, the promotion of their independence and participation in the community.

2. Quality of teaching

- The overall quality of teaching across the school is commendable. In the parent questionnaires, all parents agree that teaching is good in the school. Within a

whole-school approach, the class teams of teachers and special needs assistants and the behaviour support team collaborate effectively to ensure that pupils' individual learning needs are addressed appropriately. Pupils' holistic learning needs are identified, prioritised and addressed systematically, and monitored through their well-planned individualised education programmes. A good range of child-centred, autism-specific approaches is implemented carefully in each classroom.

- Curriculum resources and methodologies, including ABBLs, ABA and TEACCH materials, PECS, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines for pupils with learning disabilities, and the Primary School Curriculum are all employed beneficially in supporting teaching practices across the school.
- In accordance with the needs of individual pupils, further opportunities to support pair and group interaction should be explored in classroom and recreational settings to extend pupils' social and communication skills.

3. Support for pupils' well-being

- The support provided for pupils' well-being in school is very good. In the parent questionnaires, all parents agree that their child is doing well in school. The strong awareness of the needs of the pupils arising from autistic spectrum disorder informs practice of the management of behaviour. This factor combined with the highly collaborative approach of the principal, director and staff team provides a coherent and supportive framework in which the developmental needs of the pupils are consistently and skilfully attended to. Specific and individual accommodations are in place to support pupils' development of self-management skills. Pupils benefit from and enjoy the well-organised learning experiences in the community, including shopping, visits to local cafés and the use of local amenities. A system of home-school communication books facilitates good links with home and an understanding of the pupils' changing needs. Building on existing good links with local mainstream schools, opportunities to promote inclusive learning experiences for pupils should, as far as is practicable, be further developed. The proactive whole-school response

to the management of the pupils in evidence during the period of evaluation is commendable.

- 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

- Very impressive shared leadership is in evidence across the school and this facilitates the provision of a high quality service to the pupils. The board of management has proactively managed the growth and development of the school over a number of years. The principal, inschool management team and director collaborate very successfully in the good management of the school.
- Effective systems of communication have been put in place and there is on-going communication to address issues emerging across the school. An open style of leadership facilitates constructive communication and effective collaboration among staff members. In school management and staff meetings are scheduled regularly to plan, organise and manage the work of the school. The parents' association has contributed positively to the school community over many years. The parent questionnaires indicate that most parents agree that the school is well run and most parents are happy with the school.

5. School Self-evaluation

- Stepping Stones Special School has engaged successfully with school self-evaluation processes. The systematic use of assessment data provides a strong evidence base for programme planning. Effective development planning has been undertaken at a whole-school level over a number of years. Specific targets have been identified in the school improvement plan. This work is on-going and is reflected in the comprehensive language and communication planning which contributes to

classroom practice. A time-frame for the phased progression and review of whole-school planning should be set out by the in-school management team.

Conclusion

- This school's capacity to develop further and to engage in school improvement is very good. There is evidence that the recommendations of previous evaluations have been carefully implemented. The management and work of the school demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement of the provision to the pupils in its care.

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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.

On behalf of the whole school community the Board of Management of Stepping Stones Special School is delighted to accept, and welcome the findings of the Department of Education and Skills Whole School Evaluation Management Leadership and Learning Report (WSE-MLL). The School has grown and developed by focusing on the ongoing needs of the pupils and building the best team of dedicated, expert staff to provide the best possible learning environment for pupils and all stakeholders, The school acknowledges the participation of all stakeholders over the years which has contributed to the success of the school, most of all, our incredible pupils who continue to inspire us.

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 accepts the main recommendations made in the report and can confirm the following:

- collaboratively, the school's teaching staff have made the appropriate changes in their group planning to meet the needs of individual pupils. Staff have created in-classroom opportunities to support pair and group interaction. In addition, team-teaching approaches have been adopted in both, classroom and recreational settings to extend pupils' social and communication skills.
- the in-school management team in conjunction with the board of management is presently reviewing the whole school planning. This follows the recommendations of the findings of the school's SSE and school's improvement plan setting a time-frame for the phased progression in the making and delivery of more curricular policies that

reflect our practice.

- a project of integration will be piloted and is due to commence during this school year with a local secondary school. This will continue building upon existing good links with local mainstream schools and further develop the opportunities to promote inclusive learning experiences for pupils.



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