



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of Education
and Youth

Evaluation of Special Classes for Autistic Students

Final Report

Ainm na scoile/School name	Sandymount Park Educate Together Secondary School
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Newgrove Avenue, Sandymount, Dublin, D04 Y1F6
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	68305F
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	06/11/2025
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/ Date of issue of report	11/12/2025

What is an evaluation of special classes for young people with autism?

- Special classes are classes, established by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in primary and post-primary schools. They are designed to provide a supportive learning environment to autistic young people¹ who are unable to access the curriculum in mainstream lessons, even with support, for most or all of their school day. The class is part of the school and the school's board of management has overall responsibility for the class.
- The Inspectorate conducted an evaluation of provision in a number of special classes in post-primary schools in 2025. This is a record of feedback given following an evaluation of classes in Sandymount Park Educate Together Secondary School on 3rd and 6th November 2025.

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 (CSS) are prominently displayed near the main door of the school / in the reception area. 2. The school's child safeguarding statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment. 3. All teachers visited were aware of who to go to if they had a child protection concern. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The school has developed an anti-bullying policy using Appendix A of Bí Cineálta, it is reviewed annually (or earlier if required) and includes a student/pupil friendly version that is displayed where students/pupils and the school community can see it. 2. The school's anti-bullying policy is published on its website and/or is readily accessible to board of management members, staff, parents and students/pupils. 3. The board of management minutes record that the principal provides an update to the board at each ordinary board meeting that meets the requirements of Bí Cineálta.

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

Identification of interests, strengths and need

- There were very good processes in place to gather and share information on the interests, strengths and needs of autistic students in the special class. These included very effective means of capturing the perspectives of young people, their parents, teachers and relevant professionals. These processes ensured that staff working with students in the special class knew students well. Staff, including the special class coordinator, SNAs and mainstream teachers demonstrated a very strong understanding of the students' preferred ways of working and their needs throughout the school day. This understanding was utilised by all staff working with the students to inform daily greetings and interactions, to support school routines and transitions and to support the students' engagement and their learning. Both

¹ The Inspectorate acknowledges that there are different perspectives in relation to terminology when describing autism. Some use person-first language (young person with autism) as this recognises that the presentation of autism can vary from person to person. Others refer to autistic as this embraces the neurological difference of the person. During this inspection, the inspector checked with the school community regarding its preference. This record uses both terms as this reflects their use in the school.

students and parents perceived that staff had very good awareness of students' needs and progress.

- The identified interests, strengths and needs were used to set targets for learning in the student support plans and to inform the priority learning needs of the students. In addition, in the termly school reports and the letters sent home to parents, the special class coordinator and teachers referred to the young person's strengths and progress. This affirmed students as individuals and acknowledged their success. Within the student support plans, planning for transitions, especially the transition into first year and the transition into senior cycle, could be strengthened. It is recommended that the school further develop and expand the transition programme and provide greater supports for incoming first years in the special class.

Meeting the students' needs through the learning programme

- The special class environment provided an inviting calm, flexible, readily accessible space, supporting students' organisation and their emotional and sensory regulation. The timetables for students were balanced with variety and with practical or active subjects interspersed throughout each day. All students accessed the level 3 Junior Cycle programme as was appropriate to their needs and strengths. The learning programme included lessons in the special class, some one-to-one support lessons and access to mainstream subject lessons for some or most of the school day. Students also benefited from tutor time, Life Skills, Social Skills and Leisure and Recreation activities. They were also encouraged to engage in extra-curricular activities and facilitated to learn in the community and to self-regulate independently. Students had movement breaks integrated into the hour-long lessons. Students perceived that they were progressing well and that the support provided was very helpful.
- At the time of the evaluation, most, but not all, students in the class were learning Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE). In addition, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) was not timetabled. The learning programme should be reviewed so that all students learn SPHE, PE and CSPE throughout junior cycle, in line with Department of Education and Youth Circular 28/2023. While some Guidance-related learning was integrated in the learning programme, it was not understood as Guidance by the students or their parents. The school should be explicit about when it is providing focused lessons and activities in Guidance. SPHE lessons were provided in the special class setting only. The special class coordinator and SPHE teacher should plan to provide some opportunities for students in the special class to learn SPHE with their peers in the mainstream setting, and, if appropriate, gradually increase this.

Meeting the students' needs through teaching and learning

- All lessons observed were very good in meeting students' needs and overall, very good learning took place. Learning activities in both mainstream lessons and support settings were meaningful and engaging. Teachers' instructions were clear. Learning was well structured with sequential activities that progressively developed understanding. Junior cycle key skill development was highly effective in all lesson activities. Students and teachers used autism-supportive approaches including checklists, staged approaches to tasks, visual prompt sheets/cards and guided practice, combined with very good SNA check-ins at key moments, movement and transitions. It was very positive that teachers provided differentiated pathways in learning that gave choice and autonomy to students. Teachers set tasks so that learning was active and collaborative thereby developing communication and language, emotional and social skills as well as academic skills. Very

productive group work was integrated into each lesson and the students with autism coped very well with these activities. Teachers provided very good support for self-regulation and enabled the students with autism to achieve step by step.

- The principal had planned future staff engagement with the NCSE Relate document and this will provide further support in developing students regulating skills. In a small number of instances, there was a need to ensure learning activities are sufficiently challenging and to improve the seating arrangements for group activities so that all students can maximise their engagements with their peers. Parents were not aware that their child received reasonable accommodation for school tests, and this should be discussed by the coordinator with parents when they liaise with parents prior to school termly tests to discuss preparation for participation in the tests, and to seek their support.

Monitoring and reviewing outcomes

- In subject lessons, student progress was very well monitored and reported through completed work, tests and termly reports. Teachers provided helpful, detailed and formative reports to parents on students' engagement with learning, homework, revision and effort. The special class coordinator maintained frequent and regular contact with parents through phone calls, meetings and a letter detailing the progress that the student has made. Teachers' verbal assessment and guidance provided to students during tasks was very good and it enabled students to improve their own work. Teachers used very helpful feedback slips referencing what is working well, what would be even better and set targets for the student to achieve in their subject. Tasks and homework were often differentiated, giving choice to learners which enhanced engagement and independence in learning.
- The process of monitoring and reviewing outcomes in the student support plans was very good. A formal review of the plans took place biannually, or earlier if required. Students and their parents were meaningfully involved in the review process and parents indicated that they were very confident that their child was making progress. While practice in monitoring and review was very good, in a few instances, there was scope to strengthen the written references to students' ongoing progress within the student support plans.
- There was no formal process in place to review each student's placement in a special class on an annual basis. It is recommended that the school include a clear reference in the admissions policy that a review of each child's place in the special class will take place annually in line with Department of Education and Youth Circular 23/2025.

Whole-school inclusive practices

- The school had one special class for autistic students at the time of the inspection and this was located centrally in the school. The school demonstrated a very inclusive ethos and a commitment to the inclusion of more special classes for students with autism in their school provision in the future. The school environment supported the inclusive experiences of students with autism. The school took the step of not having a bell or intercom in the interests of maintaining a calm environment with less noise interruption. The physical environment and the routines were helpful, and the students moved purposefully and safely during all transitions and between classes. Desks were arranged in all rooms to facilitate all students to work together in groups and for teachers to support individual students. Timetables and tutor time for students with autism mirrored those used in the rest of the school. All students in the school including those with autism used iPad devices to access resources, learning and to submit work and this was very successful and was working well for the students with autism. Parents' perception of their child's inclusion in the school community was good and students' perception of their own inclusion was very good.

- The principal allocated teaching resources for the special class appropriately and the teachers with expertise and training in special education, including training in autism-related practice, were deployed to support the students in the special class. School policies were inclusive, the code of behaviour was appropriate to all students including those with a special class place and the special educational needs policy provided appropriate guidance in relation to special classes.

Leadership of special class provision

- The special class was very effectively led by one coordinator who was responsible for running the class, preparing and monitoring the student support plans and liaising with the students, their parents, the support teachers, the mainstream subject teachers and progress leaders (year heads). The coordinator promoted a very good understanding of autism throughout the school community. The principal, students and parents expressed very high levels of confidence in the leadership of the special class.
- A core team of teachers was established and deployed with skills and/or training in autism-informed approaches. The coordinator, together with the principal, were members of the school's special education needs team and held regular collaborative meetings to discuss and oversee special class provision. The coordinator and teachers' qualifications included special education, and they had engaged in a range of training from the NCSE including training for school leaders in autism and in special classes, the Autism Good Practice Guidelines and training in evidence-based literacy interventions.

This feedback was discussed with the principal, deputy principal and the coordinator. The school was also provided with an opportunity to factually verify this record.

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