An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Curriculum Evaluation: Language and Communication REPORT

Ainm na scoile/School name	St Joseph's Special School
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Parnell Street Waterford
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	19244J
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	16/05/2025
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/Date of issue of report	25/09/2025

What is a curriculum evaluation?

Curriculum evaluations report on the quality of teaching and learning in specific subjects of the *Primary School Curriculum (1999),* the *Primary Language Curriculum (2019)* and the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum.* They affirm good practice and make recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of the subject in the school.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspector(s) evaluated learning and teaching in Language and Communication under the following headings:

1. Quality of pupils' learning outcomes
2. Supporting pupils' learning through learning experiences and teachers' practice
3. The effectiveness of school planning, including SSE, in progressing pupils' learning

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.

Included in this curriculum evaluation report is a student-friendly page that provides information for the children/young people in your school about the inspection that occurred recently. It outlines for them some of the main findings and recommendations.

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

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection and anti-bullying procedures were conducted:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Child Protection</td><td>Anti-bullying</td></tr>
<tr><td>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.</td><td>1. The school has developed an anti-bullying policy that meets the requirements of the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013) or Bí Cineálta (2024) 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 pupils.</td></tr>
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The school met the requirements in relation to checks 1 and 3 of the child protection checks. It did not meet the requirements of check 2 of the child protection checks. However, the school subsequently furnished evidence of compliance with this requirement.

The school met the requirements in relation to check 2 of the anti-bullying checks. It did not meet the requirements of check 1 of the anti-bullying checks. However, the school subsequently furnished evidence of compliance with this requirement.

Curriculum evaluation

Date of inspection	15/05/2025-16/05/2025
Inspection activities undertaken • Discussion with principal and teachers • Review of relevant documents • Pupil focus-group interview	• Observation of teaching and learning • Examination of pupils' work • Interaction with pupils • Feedback to principal and teachers

School context

St. Joseph's Special School is a co-educational special school located on Parnell Street, Waterford City. It operates under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Waterford and Lismore. The school caters for learners aged between four and eighteen years. All learners have a mild general learning disability and may have co-occurring physical and/or complex needs. Some have an additional diagnosis of autism. The school has three classes for children and young people with autism and it also offers an early intervention class for pre-school children with autism.

At the time of the evaluation, the teaching staff allocation comprised an administrative principal, an administrative deputy principal and fourteen class teachers. One of the class teachers was employed as a support teacher. In addition, twenty-three full-time special needs assistants (SNAs) and one part-time SNA were employed in the school. The school had an allocation of fifty-two co-operation hours per week from the Waterford and Wicklow Education and Training Board. Six co-operation hours per week remained unfilled, despite the ongoing efforts of the Board of Management. The school also had access to a part-time nurse. Ninety-nine children and young people were enrolled in the school and all had access to the Department of Education and Youth funded transport scheme.

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- The quality of learning in Language and Communication was good and learners displayed very good social skills; they could initiate and engage confidently in conversation.
- Learning experiences were good overall; classroom environments were positive and calm and interactions between staff and learners were respectful and affirming.
- The quality of teaching was good overall, with some examples of very good teaching observed.
- The quality of school planning, including school self-evaluation (SSE), was effective in progressing learning in the areas of Language and Communication.
- School leaders had a clear vision for improving teaching and learning, including the progression of learners' communication and language skills.

Recommendations

- Learners' ability to write recounts was consistently developed as they progressed through the school. To broaden learners' writing experiences further, teachers should extend the range of genres in which learners write.
- In a few instances, very good examples of collaborative learning were noted. Throughout the school, there was a need for teachers to provide more regular

opportunities for learners to engage in collaborative learning with their peers, in line with their abilities.

- The SSE plan was overly general in nature and should be reviewed to include more specific and measurable targets for improvement to support very high-quality learning in Communication and Language.
- School leaders were strongly committed to developing consistency in whole-school approaches to teaching and learning including Language and Communication; to support this, they were advised to extend opportunities for teachers to observe, share and discuss practices that have proven successful in improving learning.

Detailed findings and recommendations

1. The quality of pupils' learning outcomes

The quality of learning in Language and Communication was good. Learners demonstrated commendable levels of interest and participation in learning. They were supported to be calm, regulated and ready to learn.

Overall, learners' oral skills were well developed. Most learners were able to follow instructions, answer questions and express preferences. As they progressed through the school, they were supported to develop the capacity to make choices and take turns. Many learners also displayed very good social skills; they could initiate and engage confidently in conversation. In the senior years, learners were facilitated and able to make presentations and to participate in debates.

Where learners had more complex communication profiles, a range of augmentative and alternative approaches including assistive technology was in place. All learners were encouraged to become familiar with *Lámh, the standardised manual sign system designed for children and adults with intellectual communication needs*. In some settings, teachers and staff used Lámh to good effect to develop learners' language and communication skills. In others, there was scope to provide for more consistency in its use.

The quality of learners' writing was good. Learners used their knowledge and understanding of language to trace words and to write sentences, both with support and independently. Their ability to write recounts was consistently developed as they progressed through the school. To broaden learners' writing experiences further, teachers should extend the range of genres in which learners write.

Learners' reading skills were good. They demonstrated an interest in reading and an enjoyment of story. Learners read a range of materials and the level of text was appropriately challenging.

2. Supporting pupils' learning outcomes through learning experiences and teachers' practice

The quality of the learning experiences in Language and Communication was good overall. Classroom environments were positive and calm and interactions between staff and learners were respectful and affirming.

In the focus-group discussion, learners described how they enjoyed spending time with their friends in school. They outlined the broad range of strategies they employed to complete tasks including using rough work, asking a teacher or SNA for help or completing easier elements of the task first. They described a range of activities that supported the development of their language and communication skills. These included field trips throughout Waterford, recreational outings with the local post-primary school, and work experiences both within the school and in the wider community.

During interactions with the inspection team, learners spoke very positively about the many opportunities they had to develop their leadership skills during their time in school. While a number of committees were established, including the Green Schools Committee and the Sports Committee, a student council was not established. To build on the existing structures for learners' participation in school life, school leaders should oversee the development of a Student Council and consider how this could be used as a mechanism to strengthen learner voice across the school.

The school provided the Primary Curriculum, Level One and Two Junior Cycle Learning Programmes (L1/2LPs) and a school designed Senior Cycle programme. In the senior classes, learners benefited from well-organised, school-designed vocational work experience programmes for school leavers. The school were reviewing and planning to engage with, the Senior Cycle Learning Programmes: Level 1 and Level 2.

Overall, the quality of teaching in Language and Communication was good. Very good teaching was also observed in some settings. In almost all instances, teachers used curriculum-appropriate teaching and learning methodologies. They also identified activities that interested and motivated learners. Teachers were well prepared, lessons were appropriately structured and paced, and teachers purposefully linked language and communication across curricular areas.

A thematic approach to preparation was evident throughout the school which supported teachers' collaborative practice. Teachers had a very good knowledge of learners' sensory needs and consistently took steps to accommodate these needs and ensure that learners were regulated. Teachers and SNAs collaborated very well to respond to learners' needs.

In some classes, where the most effective teaching was observed, teachers used creative and playful teaching approaches which were highly successful in stimulating learners' engagement and participation. The focus of new learning was clear and there was a strong emphasis on the use of visual resources and other stimuli to support clear communication. Learners were supported to interact with each other and in a few instances, very good examples of collaborative learning were noted. Throughout the school, there was a need for teachers to provide more regular opportunities for learners to engage in collaborative learning with their peers, in line with their abilities.

In the classes for learners with autism, a wide range of strategies to support communication was used very effectively to positively impact on learners' expressive and receptive language skills. These included visual schedules, 'first-then' cards, pictures, story and sensory circuits. They conveyed meaning and created a predictable, low arousal environment which reduced anxiety and facilitated learning.

Teachers' assessment practices were effective; records of learning were carefully maintained. At the time of the evaluation, school leaders were working to develop a more consistent whole-school approach to assessing learners' incremental progress. In most instances, learners' support plans included a communication goal. This good practice should be extended to all support plans. There was some scope for teachers to use the available assessment information to further refine targets for learning in Language and Communication to be more specific.

Teachers' questioning skills were generally good and, in the best instances, teachers made strategic use of open-ended questioning and provided adequate thinking time for learners to process their thoughts. Commendably, these very good practices elicited extended contributions from learners. Teachers were advised to extend the provision of sufficient thinking or processing time for learners when asking questions and to increase the use of more open-ended questioning during whole class discussions, as appropriate.

3. The effectiveness of school planning, including SSE, in progressing pupils' learning

School planning, including SSE, was effective in progressing learning in language and communication in the school. School leaders and teachers worked collaboratively to develop a comprehensive whole-school plan for language and communication which provided good direction and guidance for staff. The school engaged positively with the SSE process. Data was gathered from the wider school community and was used to identify priority areas for development. While overall, the SSE plan was useful in guiding development of Language and Communication at the school, there was scope to refine the plan to include more specific and measurable targets to further support improvement to support very high-quality learning in Communication and Language. School leaders should lead a review of the plan, as it relates to Language and Communication, and ensure that identified targets are sufficiently specific and measurable.

Teachers undertook a commendable level of professional learning to enhance their practice. The impact of this learning was evident in classrooms, particularly in terms of supporting learners' behaviour and engagement with learning.

School leaders had developed very good links with outside services and professionals. They had a clear vision for improving teaching and learning, including the progression of learners' communication and language skills, in the school. They provided very good support to newly appointed staff and were strongly committed to developing consistency in whole-school approaches to teaching and learning. To support this very good work, they were advised to extend opportunities for teachers to observe, share and discuss practices that have proven successful in improving learning.

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Department of Education and Youth

For the pupils of St Joseph's Special School about their learning in Language and Communication

Date of inspection: 15/05/2025-16/05/2025

Introduction

Your school had an inspection of Language and Communication recently. This page for learners describes what the inspectors found and gives ideas about what the school should do to make learning better.

What did the inspectors do during the visit?

The inspectors visited classrooms and talked to teachers and learners about the work they were doing. An inspector also met with a focus group of pupils to talk to them about their learning.

What did the inspectors find?

Here are some of the main things:

- Learning was good in the school. Learners were really good at talking and working with others. They could start conversations and chat confidently.
- Learners had a good time learning in the school. Classrooms were happy and calm. Staff and learners were respectful and kind to each other, and learners' efforts were praised.

What the inspectors said the school should do to make learning better

- Learners got better at writing about things that happened as they moved up through the school. Teachers should help learners to write in different ways about lots of other things.

Thank you for taking the time to read this page.
A special thank you to pupils who took part in the focus group.

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