WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Red Hill School was undertaken in April 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in English, Mathematics, Drama and Social, Personal and Health Education. The board of management 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Red Hill School was established in September 2008. The initial class of six pupils was formed and given temporary accommodation in a sitting room area of a residential home on the Rehab Care campus. The staff put considerable energy into establishing the new school within an existing residential facility. Recently, the school has successfully acquired more suitable accommodation in temporary buildings on the same site. The accommodation now includes three classrooms, a general purpose room, toilet areas and a small room currently used as a staffroom. The principal’s office is located in a small portakabin which is located adjacent to the school building. The success of the school’s management in securing suitable premises, recruiting staff, accessing appropriate training and providing suitable educational resources in such a short time period, is commended.

The school enrolment increased very rapidly from seven pupils at the end of September 2008 to the current figure of eighteen pupils. The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special classes in the school 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff including principal 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school has been awarded a devolved grant to provide larger premises and to cater for the projected increase in enrolment expected in September 2010. The school principal has established a list of prospective pupils for the new classes. She engages frequently with parents of prospective pupils who wish to visit the school in advance of application. It is estimated that the school will expand to nine classes in the next school year.

Red Hill School was established to cater for pupils who have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) aged between three and eighteen years. Currently, the full range of intellectual ability is catered for within the school. Pupils present with a continuum of general ability ranging from average intelligence to severe learning disability. Six pupils transferred from a private ASD specific school. Eleven transferred from ordinary classes in mainstream schools and one pupil had not been in school prior to enrolment in Red Hill. At the time of the evaluation, there were twenty-seven applications for places in the school. Seven applicants were in existing schools, seven in pre-school provision and thirteen had no educational placement at that time. The age range of the new applicants ranges from four to fourteen years. Accommodating such a wide range of ages, abilities and educational experience into the school will result in a dramatic change to the composition of the existing class structures as new class groups are formed.
1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision
The mission statement emphasises the uniqueness of each pupil. It seeks to engender respect for individual difference in an open, caring environment which aims to provide a holistic education for all. The characteristic spirit of the school supports this mission by providing quality individual educational programmes to enable pupils to attain their maximum learning potential. The mission statement enshrines the importance of each pupil’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). Each IEP seeks to personalise the educational provision and develop all dimensions of the pupils’ lives in consultation with significant adults and the multi-disciplinary support team.

The school was established with the Rehab Group as the patron body. The group had not previously acted as a patron of schools. The initiation of an educational dimension to its services required some adjustment to establish the management structures that are required by the Department of Education and Skills. The patron body is commended for diversifying its service provision to include the provision of education for children with ASD under the current statutory framework and in compliance with the conditions set by the Department. The successful setting up the school was aided by the provision of substantial resources and support by Rehab Group.

1.2 Board of management
The board of management was established recently but is not yet properly constituted. It is in the process of appointing members that are representative of all stakeholders and of assigning management functions to members. The board should assign roles to members in areas such as financial matters. Meetings are held on a monthly basis or more frequently if required. Minutes of previous meetings should be circulated and their acceptance as an accurate record should be the first order of business at each subsequent meeting. The chairperson is available on site and visits the school from time to time to discuss matters with the principal. The board is kept informed about school matters through a regular report from the principal, which documents significant developments. The members of the board are soon to avail of training opportunities that are provided through school management bodies to assist them in discharging their roles.

The board has begun to execute its function in regard to policy making. Policies are drawn up and discussed at staff level before being brought to the board for further review and consideration, prior to ratification. A review date should be clearly identified when each policy is signed by the chairperson so that its continuing effectiveness and suitability can be considered periodically. Good progress has been achieved in developing both organisational and curricular policies. Nevertheless, a number of key statutory policies required under legislation, including a Child Protection policy, remain at draft stage. These policies have been prioritised by the board to be formally ratified as a matter of urgency.

1.3 In-school management
The principal has been a member of staff since the school’s inception. She provides energetic leadership and clarity about her vision for the school. She maintains a clear overview of the work of the school and strives to ensure coherence in curricular planning. She interacts daily with staff and promotes good behaviour among the pupils. The school has no secretarial support and the principal carries out most administrative requirements independently.

Until recently, the principal has been without the support of a board of management. From the establishment of the new school, an interim board was established by the patron. The interim board was dissolved in December 2008 to prepare for the establishment of a fully constituted
board. This process was underway at the time of the evaluation. During this intervening period the patron is providing ongoing support and advice to the principal.

In the short time that the school has been in operation, the principal and staff have made considerable progress in compiling whole-school planning documentation. They have devised manageable methods of record keeping and have succeeded in fostering good external relations. The principal endeavours to ensure that information on the work of the school is provided in a timely manner to staff, pupils, parents and board of management. She communicates regularly with the Department of Education and Skills and its agencies such as the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

The in-school management team has not been established and although the duties have been formulated and advertised, the two posts of deputy principal and special duties teacher have not yet been filled. This process, which is a priority for the board of management, was deferred until the conclusion of the Whole School Evaluation. Managing the school and ensuring that there is effective communication among the various stakeholders, represents a significant challenge. While the principal strives to ensure that the school functions in accordance with clear procedures, the demands on her time are onerous. A fully-functioning middle management team would ease this burden and enable the principal to adopt a more strategic approach to identifying emerging needs and priorities for the on-going development of the school. It is recommended that the posts of responsibility be filled without delay. Duties should provide opportunities for post holders to develop their professional leadership skills while also distributing collective responsibility for responding to the developing needs of the school.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
In spite of the difficulties associated with a wide catchment area, a parents’ association was formed in October 2009. Some members have accessed training from the National Parents’ Council to assist them in their roles. The association is very active and has been involved in fund-raising to improve the resources and services available in the school. The contributions from the parents’ association and some monies from the board have been used to fund the services of both a behaviour therapist and a speech and language therapist. The contribution of these therapists was prioritised on the basis of a needs analysis. The financial contribution from the parents’ association is appreciated by both the board of management and the staff of the school. However, the provision of revenue to fund multi-disciplinary support is a considerable burden on resources and is unsustainable in the longer term.

Information is shared between home and school through daily notebooks which are in operation in each class. Parents also report that the escort system organised by the school facilitates communication with the homes. A formal written report is provided at the end of the school year on each child’s progress.

Parents are invited to contribute to the development of the priority aims in their child’s IEP and they meet the teachers during the year for a review of their child’s progress. This process needs to be formalised and a policy on parental input to IEPs should be agreed and documented. Parents should be provided with a copy of the document and information on how to consolidate learning in the home environment. This will provide for greater consistency of approach particularly in areas such as language and mathematical operations.

The board is determined to ensure the role of parents as full partners in education. Parents have been informed that copies of the school policies are available for consultation in the office. Otherwise, as the school was only recently established, parents have not been actively involved in
policy formation to date. In the coming months the school should consider ways in which parents
can assist in the formation of policies that are particularly pertinent to home life, such as
homework policy, relationships and sexuality education policy and child protection policy.
Parents expressed a willingness to become more involved in the work of the school. However,
given the difficulties that pupils with ASD have with role definition across domains, the school is
presented with a challenge as to how to harness this willingness and energy for the good of the
school and the benefit of pupils. The provision of the new school premises might provide
opportunities for parents to be involved in supportive activities such as art exhibitions or sports
activities. They may be able to help with the creation of nature trails or the landscaping of the
school environment to provide habitats for scientific and environmental observation.

1.5 Management of pupils
The approach to the management of pupils in this school is positive, consistent and effective. Due
to the implications of the triad of impairments which is associated with ASD, a number of
principles influence the way the teachers plan the curriculum delivery and organise the classroom
environment. In order to gain pupils’ attention, the staff members ensure that the learning
environment is meaningful to the pupils. Teaching areas are well organised and free from over-
stimulation. There are directional photographs and pictures in classrooms to indicate areas of
activity. Well-established routines and visual schedules ensure that pupils know what is expected
of them. In organizing the school day, teachers make sure that there is a balance between
comfortable experiences, such as independent work on computers, and activities that pupils find
more challenging, such as individual teaching sessions or group activities. Activities are time
tabled so that there is a rotation for curriculum subject coverage. The staff endeavours to provide
an appropriate balance between times where tasks are taught individually or collectively and
periods spent on activities that are chosen by individual pupils.

A structured approach to teaching is successfully employed as a key methodology. Teachers are
aware of the importance of visual learning and the classrooms are organised so that there are clear
visual boundaries for specific activities. Visual timetables are provided to inform the pupils on the
passage of time and sequence of daily events. Individual work stations are visually distinct from
areas for play or group work. A number of strategies are used successfully to overcome some of
the difficulties in social communication. These include the use of simple, consistent language,
providing visual clues and setting up situations that encourage pupils to attempt communication.
Individual work systems are effectively organized and give pupils information about tasks to be
undertaken, how to know when they are finished and what happens when the task has been
completed. When pupils sit at a work station, they have a clearly defined method of working.
They follow a work system involving sequences of pictures or words that correspond to work
tasks. They complete each in turn until they are finished.

In accordance with statutory requirements, the school has developed a code of behaviour. In the
coming years, in line with the needs of newly enrolled pupils, this policy will need to be reviewed
to take account of the intellectual capacity of the pupils as well as the communicative function of
their behaviour. The staff has proactively developed a behavioural support policy that is
particularly relevant to pupils’ circumstances. This policy identifies the method used to analyse
and support on-task behaviour and minimise risks associated with more challenging behaviours.
The policy provides for the development of a behaviour support plan as part of the IEP for any
pupil who exhibits aspects of behaviour that may impede learning. The evolution of this support
plan by the classroom team involves the functional assessment of any exhibited behaviours. It
identifies positive strategies to reduce triggers and teaches more appropriate strategies or
responses for dealing with the situation. It also reinforces target behaviours when exhibited. This
reinforcement often takes the form of a token economy and points systems which are used by the
pupils to gain access to motivating activities selected by them from an available menu. Reactive strategies for dealing with challenging behaviour are clearly identified and disseminated among staff to ensure pupil and staff safety. The school has commendably provided in-house training for dealing with challenging behaviour and management views this as a mandatory requirement for all staff.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The school plan has been commenced in an inclusive, collaborative manner since the school’s inception. In a short time, the board and staff have developed a number of policies and procedures to guide the operation of the school. The existing policies outline subject rationale, aims, objectives, methodologies and available resources. The board is on course to ratify draft policies to ensure that they comply with mandatory requirements. As a priority, some of the core policies which are currently in draft format need to be ratified by the board. Other policies which are required by legislation such as the code of behaviour, attendance policy and policy on special needs should be reviewed to ensure full compliance with statutory requirements.

Common templates for classroom planning have been devised and are used across the school to inform teaching and learning. Objectives for key areas in literacy and numeracy are appropriate and methodologies are considered carefully. Various types of progress records are maintained to monitor pupils’ performance. These records are used to plan subsequent instruction.

In a relatively short time, the staff has succeeded in providing a learning environment that is supportive of pupils with ASD. Teachers engage in continuous professional development and a record is maintained of in-service training that has been undertaken. Staff members demonstrate a sensitive understanding of autism and they have developed a range of suitable teaching strategies which they draw on to assist their work with individual children.

The school has invested wisely in resources and materials including information and communication technology (ICT), concrete materials, charts, pictures and educational games and these are used productively in lessons. The inventory of resources for each curriculum subject could beneficially indicate how they will be deployed in the different areas of the curriculum.

All of the teachers carry out long-term and short-term planning and provide monthly progress records in accordance with regulations. Some of the long-term planning is too general and it is recommended that planning for each curriculum area make reference to the implications of ASD for learning. Long-term planning should also outline the teaching strategies to be employed to facilitate pupil learning in each subject area. Short-term plans should be prepared on a fortnightly timeframe in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills. In some subject areas, short-term planning is repetitive in nature and needs to be more specific. In deciding what content or skills to teach, staff members should closely analyse the educational tasks, set explicit instructional goals, and delineate a logical sequence of instruction.

In addition to long-term and short-term planning, each teacher seeks to meet the needs of individual pupils through IEPs. The quality of planning in this regard is notable and has a direct impact on classroom practice. In general, the IEPs are documented by the class teacher following consultation with parents. Pupil profiles are compiled which indicate pupil’s strengths, needs and their level of functioning in certain key areas. These plans are informed by professional reports, teacher observations and consultations with parents. IEPs highlight individual priorities for learning which need to be addressed across the curriculum. In this school, the focus of the IEP is
on communication, personal skills, social skills and behaviour. Specific educational targets are matched to pupils’ needs and long term goals are broken down into small steps with provision for review. Copies of psychological assessments, speech and language therapy reports and other multi-disciplinary assessments are retained in each student’s main file.

ICT is used extensively in teachers’ planning to record pupils’ progress, and to provide resources and aids for teaching and learning. As observed during the school inspection, ICT is used successfully in teaching and learning activities. At present, ICT is used to develop reading and writing skills and to promote the acquisition of skills in numeracy. Each class has one or more computers including lap-top computers. An inventory of software has been compiled which includes CD-ROMs and DVDs on health and social issues. The school should extend this range of software resources to support learning in other areas of the curriculum. The classrooms do not yet have access to the vast range of stimulating resources that is available on the internet. Teachers are aware that computer-assisted learning can be an asset in the development of social skills among pupils with ASD. For some pupils, it may be their only means of communication. Therefore, teachers should make full use of the range of software and hardware that is currently available. Staff members are also aware that access to a computer must be carefully managed so that it does not become the only focus of attention.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures
At the time of the whole-school evaluation the board of management had not formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2001) and had not complied with the Department’s Primary Circular 0061/2006. However, at the time of the evaluation, the school’s Child Protection Policy was at a draft stage and awaiting formal ratification by the board. A designated liaison person (DLP) had been nominated for appointment and a deputy DLP had yet to be named in line with the requirements of the guidelines. It is recommended that the board of management complies with the Department’s requirements regarding child protection, including the ratification of the school policy on Child Protection and the formal appointment of a DLP and a deputy DLP.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language
Gaeilge
Ní mhúinteart an Ghaeilge sa scoil seo i láthair na huaire. Ós rud é go bhfuil daltaí ag freastal ar an scoil a bhfuil deacrachtaí foghlama acu, tuigtear go mbeidh dream pháistí a gheobhaidh cead ón Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna gan staídéar a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge. Ag an am céanna, tá sé mar aidhm ag an scoil freastal a dhéanamh ar pháistí cumasacha a bhfuil uathachas acu ach nach bhfuil deacrachtáí foghlama suntasacha eile acu. Tuigeann an bord go bhfuil sé mar cheart ag na daltaí seo staídéar a dhéanamh ar chlár iomlán sa Ghaeilge agus is léir go dteastaíonn ón hoidí an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh mar chuid den soláthar oideachais leathan. Chomh maith le sin, nuair a bheidh an fhíoireann oídí ag tabhairt aghaidh ar phlean don Teanga agus Cumarsáid a chara le chéile ba chóir dóibh deis a thabhairt dá ndaltaí dáltaí, feasacht éigin teanga (idir labhairt agus éisteacht) agus cultúr na Gaeilge, dá laghad é, a bhreith leo. D’fhéadfadh plean a dhreachtú ar stráitíseach a chabhroic leis an scoil dearadh dearach i leith na Gaeilge a chothú sna daltaí, maraon le stráitíshí chun feasacht cultúir a chothú ionas go mbeidh tuiscint níos fearr ag na daltaí ar oidhreacht chultúirthe na tíre. Dóibh síuíd atá i dteideal diolúine a fháil ón nGaeilge, ní mór na critéir a bhaineann le lmitir 12/96 a chomhlíonadh.
Irish

Irish is not taught in the school at present. Bearing in mind the presence of pupils with general learning disabilities, it is understood that several pupils will be eligible to have permission from the Department of Education and Skills not to study Irish. At the same time, the school also aims to cater for more able pupils who have autism but who do not present with other significant general learning difficulties. The board understands that these pupils are entitled to have access to a full programme in Irish and it is clear that the teachers wish to teach Irish as part of the broad educational provision. In addition, when developing a whole-school plan for Language and Communication, the teaching staff should provide opportunities for all of their pupils to acquire some awareness of the Irish language and of Irish culture, however little. Strategies could be selected in the draft plan that will assist the school in fostering a positive attitude towards Irish among pupils along with strategies to foster language awareness so that pupils will have a better understanding of the cultural heritage of the country. The appropriate procedures as outlined in Circular 12/96 should be followed for the pupils who are entitled to an exemption from studying Irish.

English

The instruction in English benefits from a range of teaching arrangements that include class tuition, paired, individual and group work. All the strands of the English curriculum are afforded due attention and the pupils benefit from a balanced exposure to the various elements of the programme. In the three classes, there is evidence of good practice with regard to structured planning for oral language activities, for differentiated reading activities and for group work. The variation in pupils’ ASD diagnoses often necessitates the inclusion of supportive visual systems such as Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), LÁMH sign language and Social Stories to assist in the oral language activities. The use of objects of reference for communication purposes may need to be extended if more pupils with severe to profound intellectual impairment are enrolled in the school. Pupils’ work is displayed in communal areas in the school and at individual workstations. However, the creation of a print-rich environment has been purposely avoided in this school as the teachers are cognisant of the need to reduce stimulation and distractions within the classroom environment.

The school has developed a topic framework for the development of oral language with various topics assigned to particular months. This framework serves to integrate the oral language under instruction across the school. As the pupils progress through the school or as new pupils with more complex needs are enrolled, the topic framework will need to be diversified further with a view towards differentiating between challenging the more able pupils and supporting those less able. The use of common topics across the school also allows for incidental reinforcement when pupils visit other classes or observe completed class work on wall displays or presentations during assemblies. Poetry and rhyme are used to a degree in all classes to foster the pupils’ enjoyment of language and to experience cadence and rhyme.

Phonological awareness is developed systematically and methodically using the Jolly Phonics programme. Daily activities in the classrooms provide practice of phonological and phonemic awareness, syllabic awareness, onset and rime; and work attack skills. The teachers deploy a Language Experience Approach to create personalised reading material for some pupils. This allows the pupils to explore, understand, talk, write and read about material that has a direct linkage to their social and physical environments. A wide variety of commercial reading schemes is used in the school to meet the diverse needs of the pupils. Some of these schemes provide regular reinforcement of high frequency words to consolidate word recognition by over learning. Class libraries contain a good choice of reading material including factual and fictional books, picture books, rhyming books and large-format books for class reading.
The functional aspects of writing are given due attention with positive promotion of fine motor skill and pencil control. Teachers support pupils in writing more creatively by providing appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure to assist them in completing their own compositions.

3.2 Mathematics
A detailed, whole-school plan has been developed for Mathematics and the school has invested in a wide range of mathematical equipment. Resources include concrete materials, games and equipment that are suitable for each strand of the curriculum. Written planning takes into account the wide variation in pupil attainment and there is a good degree of differentiation with individualised programmes. Mathematics is often taught at pupils’ work stations. Within these areas, teachers and SNAs working under their supervision pay attention to extending the pupils’ mathematical knowledge and skills. Tasks involve relevant practical experiences. Repetitive tasks such as counting, matching and sorting are used to enable pupils to master basic skills. Pupils learn to recognise patterns, make connections and work with numbers, shapes, space and measures. Teachers also provide group-learning activities and endeavour to link mathematical concepts with real-life situations and experiences.

Certain mathematical concepts are more difficult for pupils with ASD to master because of their poor verbal reasoning skills. To compensate for this, teachers give plenty of concrete examples and allow pupils to engage in over-learning activities to consolidate concepts. Throughout the school day, the staff members create opportunities for pupils to use number and mathematical language. There is an emphasis on the language of mathematics. A list of agreed terminology and specific language has been delineated for each class level. Occasionally, skills are generalised to functional settings. For example, pupils have been given the experience of using money on shopping trips.

3.3 Social, Personal, and Health Education,
The positive climate that prevails in the school and the pleasant atmosphere in classrooms contribute to the pupils’ social, personal and health development. Teachers and SNAs have established relationships with the children that are based on consistency and predictability. Although it has its limitations in terms of space and lack of communal areas, the physical environment of the school promotes the general well-being of the children. The building and its environs are fenced off with coded entry points to make the school safe.

A range of suitable experiences is offered in SPHE. Learning and teaching occur both formally and informally, and the staff endeavours to foster the welfare of each individual pupil. Opportunities are provided to foster the personal development, health and wellbeing of the pupils and to help them to develop supportive relationships. The pupils are encouraged to actively participate in their learning experiences, to respect others and develop social competence. The teachers try to provide opportunities for each child to succeed and to develop individual talents. A sense of belonging is promoted and individual achievements are celebrated.

Teachers are aware that SPHE addresses areas which are particularly important for pupils with ASD. In their daily interactions in class, pupils are treated with dignity and respect by teachers and SNAs. Adults sensitively support the pupils through activities, which they find challenging. Opportunities are provided for pupils to work alone, to work with a partner or to work in larger group. Children are encouraged to be respectful towards each other. SPHE is sometimes integrated with other subject areas. Teaching strategies include social stories, class discussion and
a limited number of play and drama activities. Teachers use checklists of pupils’ emerging social skills to enable them to identify and plan for social skills development. Educational outings are carefully planned and managed. There is a focus on developing communication skills and on promoting appropriate behaviour in public places. A checklist is in place for monitoring behaviour in the playground, in a café and in public toilets. These checklists could be profitably expanded to include social skills which other children acquire naturally but which may require discrete tuition for pupils with ASD. These might include incremental stages in the use of escalators, lifts, pay phones, or requesting information from shop personnel regarding the location of items or the functions of particular objects.

Many incidental examples of good practice were observed during the evaluation which were not recorded or detailed in teachers’ planning. For example, teachers were seen devoting a lot of time developing the pupils’ self-esteem; their social, communication and protection skills; and ensuring pupils are able to make appropriate expressions of feelings and safety. These are very worthy goals and as such, should be incorporated as learning objectives or targets in teachers’ written planning.

At whole-school level, future planning for SPHE should be informed by the caring ethos of the school and should take into account the impact of ASD on pupils’ social and personal development. Long-term planning should be further developed within the context of the school plan and should be informed by in-service training in special education and ASD-specific courses in particular. Teachers should plan to develop the pupils’ social competence with a particular emphasis on small-group activities, including structured play activities and collaborative work in twos and threes. Specific social interaction skills should be taught using contrived and real social situations. Some of the more abstract areas in SPHE may be difficult for pupils. These include interpersonal skills and social rules. These areas should be a high priority for pupils with ASD. Pupils should be taught social rules specifically and in a generalised way across various domains.

Particular attention should also be devoted to helping pupils recognise their own feelings and those of the people around them. Particular emphasis should be placed on the use of Drama in SPHE as Drama provides valuable active learning situations in which pupils can explore human relationships, behaviours and events. The inclusion of play activities will also allow social skills to be taught in natural settings.

Close consultation with parents should be an essential element in the school’s planning and review process for SPHE. This will ensure that the pupils are provided with a consistent experience in SPHE at school and at home. School policies on bullying, relationships and sexuality education; and substance misuse prevention should be developed in consultation with parents. Members of the local community such as the Garda or District Nurse could be invited to support the development of the school’s SPHE curriculum.

3.4 Drama
The teachers enthusiastically endeavour to engage the pupils in drama lessons with varying degrees of success. Dramatic techniques such as mime, improvisation and role play are used to entice the pupils into participating in the drama lessons. Pupils with ASD have significant difficulty with flexibility of thought and developing empathy with characters in dramatic situations. The school needs to consider how to structure the drama curriculum firmly on a whole school basis to cater for future intakes of pupils as the school expands. Consideration should be given to providing for fundamental play skills in the junior classes. This could be used as the basis for further imaginative and collaborative drama work as pupils progress through the school.
Pupils’ collaborative skills could be enhanced with the use of pair work or larger group work in the dramatic context.

3.5 Assessment
The teachers regard assessment as an integral part of the learning and teaching process and they have been developing a range of methods for assessing pupils’ attainments and progress. Teachers assess pupils’ learning in literacy and mathematics thoroughly through regular observation, checklists and reference to professionals’ recommendations and reports. They look for gains in learning, gaps in knowledge and areas of misunderstanding on an ongoing basis. A range of useful tests has been assembled. The methods of assessment observed, include informal assessment, teacher observation, monitoring of homework, retention of work samples, photographic records, teacher-designed tasks and checklists.

Parents contribute to their children’s assessment at the time of admission by providing information to the school on the skills acquired by their child. Teachers have also begun to use other published forms of assessment including the Psycho-Educational Profile-3 (PEP 3) and ABLLS. The teachers use assessment information to guide their planning. There is an agreement with therapists that continual assessment will be carried out using agreed checklists.

The school’s overall approach to assessment should be documented in a whole-school policy. The policy should describe both the use of formal and informal modes of assessment in the school. It should refer to the guidelines provided by the NCCA in relation to assessment for learning and assessment of learning.

The school already makes use of IEPs which focus on the development of communication competence, social skills and measuring progress in achieving core-curriculum targets. The whole-school approach to assessment should also focus on assessing pupils’ behaviour as well as their play and leisure skills. Functional behaviour assessments and recording of the frequency and duration of challenging or inappropriate behaviour will provide teachers with a better understanding of the functions of problem behaviour. This should be productive in informing the development of effective intervention strategies.

4. Quality of Support for Pupils
4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
The school’s designation as an ASD school without an assigned intellectual ability level means that pupils present with a continuum of intellectual abilities which ranges from profoundly disabled to average intelligence. Pupils will also range in age from three to eighteen years. This represents a significant challenge in terms of establishing suitable class groupings and ensuring the provision of appropriate curricular programmes in the range of subject areas. This may involve preparing some senior pupils for state certification programmes while also ensuring that their complex needs are met on an emotional and behavioural level.

Pupils who present with more complex needs will require additional measures to provide baseline information on which to base programme interventions. The school should consider developing functional assessments of sensory modalities. This will ascertain the impact of visual or hearing impairment on learning. It will also help to ascertain if sensory sensitivities are present which might later impede the pupils’ ability to engage productively in the classroom environment.

The school has developed clear protocols to support pupils who are exhibiting challenging behaviour. An Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) consultant has been employed to observe
report on and structure new interventions for pupils whose behaviour is proving to be challenging in the classroom and school context.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

The school’s enrolment policy enshrines the right to access for pupils from all backgrounds and nationalities. As the enrolment continues to increase, consideration should be given to how to cater for cultural differences among the pupils. For instance, it is possible that some pupils may come from homes where English is an additional language (EAL). The school has received a copy of EAL resources for primary schools from Integrate Ireland. The pervasive use of PECS within the school environment will complement these resources as PECS provides pupils with an additional visual reference. Given that the school is poised to enrol pupils up to eighteen years of age, staff will also need to source EAL materials for post-primary pupils.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school has a committed board of management. The patron body is receptive to developing this new special school for autism within the range of services it provides.
- The school benefits from a strong and enthusiastic Parents’ Association which is eager to become involved in school activities, as well as fundraising to provide resources.
- The principal is enthusiastic and highly committed to developing the school as a centre of excellence.
- There is a strong sense of commitment by the staff to the provision of a quality educational experience for the pupils enrolled in the school.
- There is a pleasant atmosphere in the school. Pupils cooperate with staff and participate willingly in learning activities on a consistent basis.

The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

- It is recommended that the board of management prioritises the ratification of the school policy on Child Protection and formally adopt the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2001).
- It is recommended that the vacant positions on the board of management are filled without delay so as to provide the appropriate range of expertise at management level.
- It is recommended that the school fill the posts of responsibility without delay. The range of duties should provide opportunities for post holders to develop their professional leadership skills, while also responding to the developing needs of the school.
- It is recommended that the teachers develop a whole-school policy to guide the ongoing development of an assessment framework. The policy should be informed by the NCCA guidelines.
- It is recommended that the school continues to work on the development of curriculum plans across the range of subject areas. These plans should set out a broad and balanced range of learning activities, and take account of the pupils’ ages, their intellectual abilities and the impact of ASD on their learning and behaviour.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and the board of management where the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

*Published March 2011*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Reference: PP2/3In School Management 1.3

During the intervening period between the dissolution of the Interim Board, the Patron appointed a Manager who provided extensive support and line management to the Principal.

The Patron ratified the appointment of the Board of Management early in 2010 before the commencement of the Whole School Evaluation

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

Reference: Page 2, Board of Management 1.2.

(a) One outstanding elected position to the Board of Management was filled by May 2010.

(b) Board of Management functions were assigned to various members in April 2010

(c) Finance: Joint Treasurers have been appointed.

(d) Minutes have been circulated before meetings since April 2010.
(e) Board meeting agendas, are organised and have been structured as per the following Meeting agenda

- Apologies (if any)
- Minutes,
- Matters Arising,
- Correspondence
- Policies
- Chairperson’s address
- Principal’s Report
- Treasurer’s Report,
- Parents’ Report
- H&S
- A.O.B.
- Agreed Report
- Date of next meeting

(f) Training: Seven of the eight Board members attended training facilitated by the CPSMA at Kilmurry Lodge Hotel, on Wednesday evening 3rd November 2010. Two further training sessions planned for November and December had to be rescheduled due to inclement weather. The Chairperson facilitated two sessions on the Board’s Financial Procedures with the joint treasurers in June, a further session in August, and formal training was provided to the treasurers by the Patron’s Financial Department on November 9th 2010.

(g) Policies: the Board has prioritised the ratification of policies and has produced a comprehensive Health and Safety Framework, all policies have/will have a review date.

Reference: PP2/3 In School Management 1.3

(a) The Board of Management authorised the recruitment of a secretary for the Principal at its meeting of October 11th 2010, however as funding for this post derives from existing funding, the Board currently has restricted scope for the provision of secretarial services

- A deputy principal has now been appointed, other posts will be filled ASAP.


The Board has developed a Child Protection Policy and Guidelines in compliance with Children First, National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DOHC 1999) and Department of Education and Skills’ Child Protection and Procedures 2001; This was ratified by the Board on 8th November 2010.
The Principal has been formally appointed as Designated liaison person (DLP): the appointment of a Deputy Principal facilitates the appointment of a Deputy DLP.

Irish is available to pupils since the 1st of September 2010