Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Michael’s National School,
Danesfort,
Co. Kilkenny
Uimhir rolla: 01300Q

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St. Michael’s National School was undertaken in March, 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, Irish, Mathematics and Physical Education. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St. Michael’s National School is a two-teacher, co-educational primary school situated in Danesfort, approximately eight kilometres south of Kilkenny city. The school is very proud of its location, which overlooks open fields, abound with natural beauty. A national school has been located in Danesfort since 1836 and was replaced by the present school building, built in 1988, consisting of two classrooms, an office and toilets. The school recently procured a prefabricated classroom to accommodate the visiting learning-support teacher and resource teacher. Currently, the school has an enrolment of 32 pupils allocated to two multi-class classrooms. There are 20 pupils in the junior room and 12 in the senior room (second to sixth class). As enrolment increases, the principal is mindful of the need to review the organisation of classes so as to ensure the optimum distribution of pupils in the two classrooms.

The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

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<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
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<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
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<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
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<td>Special needs assistants</td>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

St. Michael’s National School is under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Ossory. The ethos of the school recognises the central role of the family and of parents in their children’s education. It places significant emphasis on the holistic development and education of children in a safe environment where they are encouraged to develop to their maximum potential and fulfil their role in society. There is a strong emphasis on creating a happy and co-operative learning environment for those who work and study in St. Michael’s school.

1.2 Board of management

The school is well managed by a committed and diligent board of management. It is properly constituted and specific tasks have been allocated to some members. Ordinarily, board meetings
are convened five times per year and additional board meetings are convened if necessary. Minutes of meetings are carefully maintained and school accounts are vigilantly recorded and submitted annually for external audit. Ongoing priorities for the board include health and safety, maintenance of the school building and preparing for the anticipated growth of the school. The principal and the assistant teacher are members of the board and this ensures very clear communication between management and staff. In addition, the chairperson of the board liaises regularly with the principal and provides him with ongoing support. The board discusses and ratifies organisational and curricular policies and, in particular, ensures all legislatively required policies are in place. The board is advised to prepare a schedule for the review of the school plan. The board emphasised the important role the school plays in the locality. Close relationships exist between the board, school partners, parents and the local community. A part-time secretary and part-time cleaner/caretaker are employed by the board and their contribution is valued by the school management and teachers.

1.3 In-school management

The principal attends to his diverse range of duties with dedication. He is very committed to the school and to the welfare and education of the pupils. He is particularly interested in developing and supporting the broader role of the school in a small rural community, and this is acknowledged and appreciated by the school partners. He has established a very welcoming school and has effectively created an environment of mutual respect. He oversees the whole-school planning process and ensures the effective day-to-day management of the school. The assistant teacher was appointed to the school in October 2009. She displays great commitment to the school and conscientiously supports the principal in his work. While she has taken responsibility for some tasks, the principal has indicated that her in-school management role will soon be formalised and dedicated tasks will be assigned. Both teachers regularly discuss pertinent matters and liaise daily regarding routine practices. To further support the in-school management of the school, it is recommended that formal staff meetings be scheduled and that they be supported by an agenda and recorded minutes.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The parents’ association, which is affiliated to the National Parents’ Council, works diligently and makes a very beneficial contribution to the school. Close links and open communication exist between the association, the board and the teachers. The association organises various fund-raising activities and has recently purchased two interactive whiteboards for the school. In addition, the association has raised funds for musical instruments, for new classroom furniture in the junior room and for transport to swimming classes. Parents are actively involved in many aspects of the school and contribute to a variety of sporting, recreational and religious events. Road safety is an ongoing concern for parents as the school is situated on a main road. The Parents’ association has been proactive in addressing this concern and has successfully improved road-side parking facilities. Parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers at the annual parent-teacher meetings and at other times by appointment. Parents receive an annual report on their child’s educational progress, including standardised test results. The school plan is accessible to parents and a school booklet, which contains general school information and some key policies, is distributed to parents. Parents are not involved in the development or review of school policies and the principal has identified this as an area for development. The officers of the parents’ association expressed their satisfaction with the quality of care and education offered by the school and the communication between teachers and parents.
1.5 Management of pupils

The overall management of pupils is very good. The teachers are keen to promote and support a welcoming, inclusive, safe environment where pupils are enabled to build their confidence and self-esteem. It is evident that pupils are valued and respected as individuals and encouraged to fulfil their academic and personal potential. Data provided by the school indicate that overall pupil attendance is very good.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The school plan incorporates a comprehensive range of organisational and curriculum policies. Organisational policies outline agreed procedures to facilitate the safe and effective management of the school. To complement the policies on learning support and assessment, it is recommended that an overarching policy on the education of pupils with special educational needs be developed. Curriculum plans have been produced in line with the strands and strand unit of the curriculum, and many indicate the subject content to be taught at each class level. The benefits of reviewing the curriculum plans following the appointment of a new teacher in the junior classes should be considered. The school is advised to prepare a whole school plan for Drama.

In parallel to the school plan, the class teachers prepare yearly schemes. It is recommended that teachers minimise the differences between both documents and adopt the school plan as their respective long-term schemes. The quality of short-term planning maintained by the teachers varies. In some instances, greater focus on objective-based planning with due emphasis on differentiated planning for a multi-class setting is recommended. The benefits of using common planning templates should be considered to support this practice. Both teachers maintain monthly progress reports. Teachers are encouraged to record this information in a format that will better inform future teaching and learning.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with the Department’s circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2001). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines. The deputy DLP is a recent appointment to the school and has not received appropriate training for this role. This matter was discussed with the board and it has indicated its intention to address this matter provided without delay.
3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

Irish

Overall, a good standard is being achieved in Irish. Pupils willingly participate in lessons. Particularly in the junior classes, visual aids, concrete materials and word games are used gainfully to extend the children’s vocabulary and understanding. In middle and senior classes, role-play and drama are employed creatively to stimulate the pupils’ enthusiasm and interest and to motivate them to use the language. Pupils’ conversational skills would be improved, however, by putting greater onus on them to speak and by placing further emphasis on the development of simple unstructured conversations and on the employment of the language outside of the formal class settings. In this regard, the provision of further opportunities for pupils to use Irish during the school day would enrich their learning. In general, the standard of pupils’ reading is age-appropriate and their ability to answer questions on the text displays good understanding of the content. However, the translation method should be avoided. To further develop the pupils’ reading abilities it is advised that a wider range of reading material be employed. In the senior classes, writing activities are based on lesson themes and grammar. It would be of benefit to cultivate a more print-rich environment and to extend the written activities further and to provide regular opportunities for the pupils to engage in personal writing in particular. A good collection of suitable poetry is available for each grouping and the pupils recite with enthusiasm.

English

Overall, the teaching of English is good. Lessons are well organised and teachers employ a balanced combination of teaching strategies. The pupils display a good level of fluency in oral English. Appropriate attention is paid to the development of listening skills in the junior classes and particular emphasis is placed on encouraging senior pupils to engage in oral communication with confidence. Material studied in other areas of the curriculum is regularly used as a basis for the development of pupils’ language skills. To further enhance the pupils’ oral skills, additional emphasis on planning for and teaching discrete oral language lessons is recommended.
Reading skills are appropriately developed throughout the school and, for the most part, pupils are fluent and confident readers. Each classroom is equipped with a library containing a range of age-appropriate fact and fiction books, and large-format books are beneficially used in the junior class. Attractive, print-rich displays in the junior classroom reflect and support the pupils’ work and it is recommended that this feature be extended throughout the school. A number of effective pre-reading activities are employed in junior classes and these are supported by rhymes, word games and other suitable resources. Commendably, the learning-support teacher effectively supports the teaching of reading in the junior class through regular in-class visits and small-group teaching using a differentiated reading scheme. Pupils in middle and senior classes display confidence in their reading ability. They indicate a good level of interest in reading books by a variety of authors and class novels are a feature of reading programmes from first class to sixth class. To further enhance the development reading among pupils in the middle and senior classes, it is recommended that the reading material be further differentiated to match the class and ability levels of the pupils.

The teaching of writing is satisfactory. The majority of pupils write well and use age-appropriate punctuation and spelling. In the junior class, careful attention is afforded to pre-writing and early-writing activities. In the senior class, pupils engage in a variety of writing activities, the majority of which is text-book based and functional. It is recommended that pupils be afforded greater opportunity to write in a variety of genre and that they be provided with an audience for their work through the display and celebration of their work in the classroom. Overall, the standard of pupils’ handwriting is satisfactory. It is recommended that more careful attention be placed on the implementation of a whole-school hand-writing policy and that teachers continuously model, encourage and affirm good handwriting among the pupils.

Pupils in the middle and senior classes are introduced to Shakespearian plays, which have been suitably adapted to reflect their age and ability levels. These lessons are very well presented and are effectively linked with other strands of the English curriculum and with Drama. A keen interest in poetry is fostered and pupils are exposed to a suitable range of rhymes and poems.

3.2 Mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good. Teaching is effective and the specific learning needs of pupils are addressed through differentiated questioning and activities, including peer support among pupils of varying class and ability levels. To further develop the current good practice, it is recommended that greater opportunity be afforded to the discussion and analysis of mathematical concepts and their application to everyday situations, relevant to pupils’ own experiences. Pupils participate enthusiastically in the practical activities and lessons are appropriately supported with a variety of resources. While some wall displays are used to good effect, further development of this area would beneficially support work across all the strand units and would provide pupils with ready access to frequently used mathematical facts and information. In the junior class, mathematical language and early mathematical concepts are consolidated and extended appropriately. The majority of pupils in both classrooms display very good competency with regard to tables and mental computation, and problem-solving skills among senior pupils are appropriately developed. Pupils’ written work is presented neatly and monitored carefully.

3.3 Physical Education

Good lessons were observed in the teaching of Physical Education. Lessons are appropriately structured and paced and due attention was placed on the development of specific skills. Pupils
participate enthusiastically in the lessons and displayed an understanding of the importance of physical fitness and well-being. The mutual respect, encouragement and inclusive participation among pupils were notable features of the lessons and of pupils’ recreational play during break times. There is no General Purpose room or hall in this school. However, the school makes very good use of the hard-surface area and a playing-field, which is regularly used for field games. The school has a supply of appropriate resource and equipment to support the implementation of the Physical Education curriculum. All pupils attend nine swimming lessons annually and, commendably, the teachers take a very active part in these sessions. In addition, external instructors support the Physical Education programme through coaching in Irish dancing and hurling. Notwithstanding this, there is an over-emphasis on the curriculum strands of games and athletics throughout the year. It is recommended that staff review the Physical Education programme to ensure a broader and more balanced physical education programme is provided.

3.4 Assessment

Pupil attainment is regularly assessed. The school’s assessment policy provides for a range of assessment modes including: standardised testing; diagnostic testing; and teacher-devised tests. The progress of pupils from first class to sixth class in literacy and numeracy is assessed annually using standardised tests. The Middle-Infant Screening Test is administered to pupils towards the end of the Senior Infant year. Pupils work is regularly monitored and corrected by teachers. The results of various assessment tests are discussed by teachers and inform the selection of pupils for receipt of supplementary support. Assessment results are communicated to parents at parent-teacher meetings and in the annual report. The programmes of work subsequently devised are suitably informed through further diagnostic testing. In the further development of assessment, it is recommended that assessments results be carefully collated, analysed and filed. This will greatly assist the tracking of pupils’ progress over time and will contribute to the implementation of more effective assessment for learning practices.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

A learning-support teacher and a resource teacher provide supplementary support to selected pupils. Both teachers are based in neighbouring schools and visit St. Michael’s regularly. They prepare suitable long-term individual profile and learning programmes (IPLPs) or individual education plans (IEPs) for their pupils and these documents are reviewed on a regular basis. Targets are realistic and are identified in consultation with class teachers. The support teachers teach in a new, spacious prefabricated classroom and, for the most part, utilise resources and equipment from their base schools. The lessons observed were of a high quality, were structured appropriately and utilised a variety of very purposeful learning strategies. Interactions between teachers and pupils were very affirming. In general, pupils are withdrawn for learning-support and resource teaching in small groups. Commendably, some in-class support is provided. It is recommended that further opportunities for effective in-class support be identified and, in the junior classes, an emphasis be placed on strategies for the early intervention with pupils experiencing learning difficulties. Parents are made aware of their children’s progress and to further develop this practice, it is recommended that they be more formally involved in the development and review of the IEP and that they have an opportunity to meet the support teachers at the time of the parent-teacher meetings.
4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

The school promotes policies of inclusion and equality, and welcomes pupils from all backgrounds. The school fulfils the requirements of the Education Welfare Act 2000 and teachers are keen to promote the well-being of the pupils. All pupils participate in school activities and equality of access, opportunity and participation is ensured. There are currently no pupils from minority or disadvantaged groups enrolled in the school. When required, the particular needs of individual pupils and their families are addressed discreetly and sensitively.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- There is an ethos of mutual respect throughout the school characterised by very positive and affirming relationships among pupils and staff.
- The school has an active board of management, which has established supportive relationships with the staff.
- A wide range of curricular and organisational policies has been developed.
- In general, the quality of teaching and learning in the school is good.
- The principal provides effective leadership and efficient management of the school.
- Staff members work collaboratively and consistently to ensure a caring, inclusive, holistic environment for all pupils.
- Pupils are very happy in the school. They participate with enthusiasm and their behaviour is very good.
- The parents are actively supportive of the work of the school and demonstrate a keen interest in their children’s education.

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

- Appropriate training for the newly appointed deputy DLP should be provided.
- Curriculum plans in the school plan should be reviewed and duly adopted by the teachers as their respective long-term schemes.
- In English, pupils should be afforded greater opportunity to write in a variety of genres and be provided with an audience for their work through its display and celebration in the classroom.
- Further opportunities for effective in-class support should be identified and, in the junior classes, an emphasis should be placed on the early identification of and support for pupils experiencing learning difficulties.

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.

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