An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Ballapousta National School
Smarmore, County Louth
Uimhir rolla: 01554 B

Date of inspection: 13 April 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

This report has been written following a whole school evaluation of Ballapousta National School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the work of the school as a whole and makes recommendations for the further development of the work of the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held pre-evaluation meetings with the principal, the teachers, the school’s board of management, and representatives of the parents’ association. The evaluation was conducted over a number of days during which inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with pupils and teachers, examined pupils’ work, and interacted with the class teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation, and met with various staff teams, where appropriate. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the staff and to the board of management. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1. INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Ballapousta National School is situated in a rural area in the hinterland of the town of Ardee. The population of the area continues to grow and expand and the school’s enrolment figures reflect this. The school’s context is positively influenced by a good level of socio-economic advantage. Pupil attendance levels are very good. The school building, prefabs and grounds are very well maintained, providing pupils with a clean, safe and attractive learning environment.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

2.1 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and is working in a very decisive and focused manner to bring about improvements in the governance of the school. There is a very tangible sense that this board is committed to implementing change. A new chairperson has been appointed following a somewhat disjointed period during which there were some changes in chairpersonship and during which no chairperson was in place for a time. The change from local, church-based chairpersonship to a lay chairperson is reported to be a challenge for some members of the school community. Teachers in the school reported to the inspector at the post-evaluation meeting that they would welcome improved communication with the board.

There is currently some disagreement amongst the school community about the use of the car park which is adjacent to the school. Having reviewed the practice of parking in the church yard, from which there is very safe pedestrian access directly to the school, the board has determined that the current arrangement is very suitable. The board should now increase its efforts to get maximum parental co-operation in using the church car park in an appropriate manner. Parking in front of the school should be actively discouraged. Issues around ownership of the car park should be amiably resolved at local and parish level.

Members of the board are anxious to make progress with a school extension. It is recommended that a building sub-committee be set up with this specific remit. The board is currently also concerned at the lack of internet access in the school and is working to amend this situation.

The active involvement of board members in the development of a wide range of school policies is commended. However, in view of the mismatch that exists between the content of the school
plan and actual practice in the school, it is now recommended that the board adopts a more involved approach to school planning.

During the evaluation non-compliance with aspects of Primary Circular 11/95, *Time in School* were identified. Excessive time is being taken prior to both of the daily breaks for the purposes of eating lunch. This is impinging upon the time available for the delivery of the curriculum. This practice of extended lunch breaks should be discontinued or the length of the school day should be extended to ensure that no teaching time is lost. The practices around attendance at weekly Mass should be reviewed. It is recommended that the board of management takes the steps necessary to ensure full compliance with the terms of Primary Circular 11/95, *Time in School*.

2.2 In-school management

The senior in-school management team comprises the principal and deputy principal. The principal has recently returned from a six-month period of absence due to ill health, during which time the deputy principal fulfilled the role of principal. During this time, a lack of clarity in school procedures led to some difficulties for the deputy principal in carrying out certain administrative functions. In regard to this, the recent volume of Section 29 appeals lodged and ultimately upheld is significant. It appears that, while the current enrolment policy is suitable, gaps in procedural practices were identified during the hearings. It is recommended that protocols and procedures be devised to enable the smooth day-to-day functioning of the school, particularly in the event of the absence of key staff members.

The principal’s in-depth knowledge of each child is a great personal strength and contributes to the affirming relationships which exist between staff and pupils. The work being carried out by him in relation to anti-bullying is of high standard and merits commendation. The principal has had a central role in compiling a large range of curricular and administrative policies that are meaningful, reflective and insightful. However, in general, there is insufficient evidence of a tangible link between much of this planning and the work in the classrooms. The lack of connection between the work of the principal and the work of the teaching staff is a particular concern. The principal should now make greater efforts to ensure that he has full knowledge of policies and their implementation. He should further develop his role in leading curriculum implementation and development. To this end, the principal needs to ensure that an appropriate emphasis is placed on differentiation on a whole-school basis and that the associated necessary resources to support teaching and learning are purchased and used.

Not all documentation and school records were in order at the time of the evaluation. Evidence of deficiencies in relation to the maintenance of official school records was found. These deficiencies refer, in the main, to the school roll books, registers and attendance record book. Significant omissions in the school register were noted; names and registration numbers assigned to pupils were carelessly written in pencil for this current school year and other necessary information was not inserted as required. A full year’s figures are missing from the daily attendance record. It is clear that the checking necessary to deal with small mistakes and omissions in the roll books is not taking place on an ongoing basis. Evidence, therefore, from this evaluation points clearly to an unacceptable pattern of ineffectiveness and negligence in this key administrative duty. This finding is highly regrettable in view of the number of times that this issue has been formally addressed by officials of the Department over a number of years prior to this evaluation. It is noted that this issue is mentioned as a matter of concern in recent board of management minutes. It is strongly recommended that the board of management immediately takes all the steps necessary to ensure that the roll books and other essential records are properly maintained in accordance with Rule 55(3) of *Rules for National Schools*.
The middle management team comprises four special duty post-holders who are caring and sensitive to the needs of the pupils. These post-holders are committed to the enhancement and development of the school. A wide range of responsibilities has been assigned to them. Many of these responsibilities are, however, primarily organisational and pastoral in focus. A specific focus on curriculum development is now required. In the light of issues relating to the administration of special education in this school, it is recommended that one special duties post be allocated to this area.

Although, individually, all post holders are making a valuable contribution to the school, it is now recommended that a team approach to in-school management be adopted to implement change in relation to issues identified in this report. To this end, the in-school management team should meet regularly on a formal basis. The overall development of the school requires that a more reflective approach to collaborative, distributed leadership be adopted and this would be a first step in that process.

2.3 Management of resources
The teaching staff consists of an administrative principal, eight mainstream class teachers, one full time learning-support teacher and one part-time resource teacher who is based in another school. The school buildings and grounds are well maintained and all concerned are highly commended for keeping the external environment attractive and free from litter. A part-time secretary is employed in the school. Some of the organisational tasks now allocated to posts of responsibility could, in the future, be assigned to the secretary.

A somewhat incoherent approach to the acquisition and dispersal of resources is in place: in some classes, few teaching resources are in evidence and, in others, resources are plentiful. Most classrooms have a supply of appropriate charts, maps, posters and library books. However, the range of reading material needs to be extended significantly. Very few books in Irish are available and mathematical equipment, while used extremely well in classes, is not sufficient to ensure the implementation of the active methodologies of the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

Information and communication technology (ICT) hardware and software are evident, with all classes having at least one new computer and one class having an interactive whiteboard. However, in general, ICT is insufficiently used as a learning tool. It is noted that a recent Department grant of €9000 allocated to the school has not yet been used. It is reported that problems with internet access have contributed to this situation. It has also emerged that, following various fundraising initiatives, the parents’ association has a very significant sum of money for school use. It is strongly recommended that some of this money be released for the purposes of purchasing resources. Agreed procedures need to be put in place to monitor the use of this money and the impact of any resources purchased on pupil learning. It is recommended, therefore, that additional attention be given to ensuring that the resources available to the school are put to appropriate use to enhance pupils’ experiences of learning.

2.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
Parents involve themselves in a range of activities to support the work of the school. They would welcome more opportunity to become more involved in school-related activities with the active encouragement of the board and the principal. The representatives of the parents’ association stated that they were very happy with standards of teaching and learning in the school.

Officers of the association indicate that there had traditionally been insufficient communication between the board and the parents’ association, but that this communication has improved over
the last year. Parents expressed concerns that their complaints are only nominally listened to. Clearly, there is a perception that no action takes place on foot of those complaints. This concern has, however, been refuted by the school staff during the evaluation and specific instances cited as to how complaints were addressed in a proactive manner. The board’s view is that there is little evidence of inaction in relation to parental complaints. Its approach is that parents must adhere to agreed procedures when making complaints. It is important that the current complaints procedure, detailed in the school plan, be fully implemented, especially in relation to informal and initial stages of the process. To facilitate this each stage of these procedures should be shared and clarified with the broader school community.

2.5 Management of pupils
The interactions between staff and pupils are positive and very affirming. Classroom management protocols are highly effective. Interesting and challenging lessons ensure, for the most part, that pupils are fully engaged in their learning. The behaviour of the pupils in this school was exemplary during the evaluation.

3. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

3.1 School planning process and implementation
The school has a very comprehensive school plan, developed in accordance with Departmental guidelines. All policy statements are well drafted, but they tend to be general in focus and they need to reflect the needs of the school and of its pupils to a greater degree. For example, many children have commendably high scores in standardised tests in both English and Mathematics. The school plan should reflect this reality and provide explicit direction to teachers as to how to extend these competencies even further. On the other hand, standards in Irish in junior and middle classes are generally low and the school plan needs to address this. Another example is the mismatch between the very reflective whole-school plan for Drama and practice in the classes. Therefore, there is an overall need to focus on the implementation of whole-school planning in the classroom. The school has already taken some steps to address this situation: for example, the staff has been involved in reflecting on a presentation on this issue entitled “from the shelf to the classroom.” The principal should now lead reflection and action as to how to ensure that the whole-school planning is having an impact on children’s learning. An action plan for this purpose should be agreed in order to expedite this recommendation.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Science Primary 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.

3.2 Classroom planning
The quality of individual teachers’ planning is inconsistent. Some teachers provide insightful, reflective and detailed short-term and long-term planning, with noteworthy attention afforded to linkage and integration. Other planning is more minimal and inadequate for its purpose. As a starting point for a cohesive planning system, it is recommended that teachers use the same planning format for short-term planning.
Pupils with learning difficulties benefit from the collaboration that takes place between the class teachers and the support teachers in the implementation of very good individual learning programmes. These programmes, however, are stand-alone entities and are not linked to ongoing planning for differentiated learning and to tailoring of curriculum content. In the case of all planning, insufficient focus is being placed on provision for differentiated learning. More able children, in particular, should be challenged by a differentiated approach to learning and this differentiation should be a core part of all planning.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

4.1 Overview of learning and teaching

Lessons, for the most part, are well paced and involve active learning. Teaching in many classes is relevant to pupils' experiences and needs. An emphasis is placed in the majority of learning contexts on the development of thinking and problem-solving skills. The relationship between teachers and pupils is mutually respectful and the pupils are systematically and conscientiously affirmed throughout the school day.

Effective and creative use is made of all available resources to explain and reinforce concepts. Teachers create and sustain independent learning routines, which reinforce and augment pupils' learning. Teaching in many classes is purposeful and engaging. While standards of teaching and learning are good, there is an overall need, however, to extend cohesion, consistency, progression and expectation in relation to some pupils' learning experiences in aspects of the curriculum. In elements of some subject areas, especially Irish, low standards are being achieved and teaching should focus on ensuring higher standards of attainment. What is expected of pupils in terms of attainment in each subject area should now be delineated at each class level. There is a need to develop a differentiated approach to learning; in particular, the work of more able pupils should be extended.

Gaeilge

Múinteoir ceachtanna Gaeilge go coisiasach tríd an scoil, ach tá caighdeán Gaeilge íseal bainte amach ag cuid mhaith de na páistí, go háirithe na bunranganna agus na meán ranganna. I ranganna faoi leith, leathnaítear foclóir na ndaltaí go céimniúil agus baineann cuid de na daltaí liofachd mhaith chumarsáide amach agus iad ag plé le réimse cúng foclóra. Uaireanta, áfach, gabhann easpa cinteachta leis na sprocianna teagaisc agus foghlama. Táthar ag dul i muintín an tsaothar leabhair an iomarca. Moltar bheim sa bhreis a chur ar fhorbairt na héisteachta ar bhonn uile scoile agus úsáid níos fairsinge a bhaint as scéalta, as drámaíocht, as dánta agus as amhráin Ghaeilge. Moltar bheim a chur ar chaint leanúnach a úsáid. Chabhródh obair théamúil le múineadh na Gaeilge.

Tá codán suntasach de dhaltaí na scoile sna ranganna sinsireacha a bhfuil caighdeán breá a bhaint amach acu sa litearthacht Ghaeilge. Sna ranganna seo déantar obair mhaith ar ghrámadach na Gaeilge a mhúineadh agus ar na briathra a chléachtaidh. Ar an ionslachta, afach, léann cuid mhaith de na daltaí na téacsanna ranga le deacracht, le droch-fhoghrafocht agus le tuiscint theoranta. Moltar an léitheoireacht a mhúineadh ar bhonn níos struchtúrtha le go mbeidh daltaí in ann foclóir dúshláinach a aithint agus brí a bhaint as téacs. Moltar breis úsáide a bhaint as scileanna fonaiciúla, comhthéacs agus focail a bhрисeadh sios ina siollá.

Bhí cleachtas éifeachtacha ar siúl trasna na scoile chun an scribhneoireacht fheidhmitiúil a fhorbairt. Mar gheall, afach, go ndeachaigh sé dian ar chuid de na páistí teanga a chumadh as a
Irish

Irish lessons are taught conscientiously throughout the school, but a low standard is being achieved by many pupils, especially in the junior and middle classes. In some classes, vocabulary is extended on a developmental basis and pupils achieve communicative fluency within a limited vocabulary range. However, sometimes there is a lack of certainty in teaching and learning objectives. Workbooks are over-used. More emphasis needs to be placed on developing listening skills on a whole-school basis and wider use should be made of stories, drama, poems and songs in Irish. Emphasis should be placed on using continuous talk. A thematic approach to the teaching of Irish would be helpful.

A significant proportion of pupils in senior classes have a good standard of literacy in Irish. In these classes good work in the teaching of Irish grammar and on the practising of verbs is in evidence. However, in general, many pupils read classroom texts with difficulty, poor phonology and with limited understanding. Reading should be taught in a more structured manner so that pupils can identify challenging vocabulary and take meaning from text. Phonological skills, context and syllabification should be used more.

Effective practices to teach functional writing across the school were evident. However, because some pupils had difficulty composing language themselves, they had difficulty communicating creatively through writing. To address this, a specific programme of work dealing with the development of writing should be devised and put into operation. The use of workbooks should be reduced.

English

Good standards in teaching and in pupil attainment are evident in aspects of the English curriculum. In the junior classes much work is carried out in early reading activities with commendable emphasis being placed on phonological awareness. Pupils throughout the school are reading in a developmental and structured way and many pupils are clearly reading at and beyond their ability levels. The teaching of poetry and rhyme is a very positive feature of classroom practice in some classes in the school, contributing positively to the pupils’ language and phonological and phonemic awareness. It is now recommended that pupils in all classes be exposed to a range of poetry on a thematic basis and that they be encouraged to memorise and appreciate selected verses and lines to enrich both oral and written language. In writing, pupils are encouraged to write in a range of genres, as suggested in the curriculum.

Children’s use of written language, however, is not fully commensurate with the very good standards in reading being attained by them. Although they tend to be correct in punctuation and spelling, the range of stylistic conventions being used is quite limited and limiting and a lack of imaginative richness is noted in the writing of many pupils. Further use of ICT, class conferencing, extended use of vocabulary word banks, use of writing frames and re-drafting of text would greatly enhance writing standards. It is evident that there are inconsistencies in the approaches to pupils’ handwriting. The school should adopt and adhere to one handwriting policy.
4.3 Mathematics
The quality of teaching and learning in the Mathematics lessons observed during the evaluation was very good. Many pupils display a high level of achievement in Mathematics. Lessons in the junior section indicate that proper emphasis is placed on early mathematical activities, with active teaching methodologies being used to explore concepts. Throughout the school, pupils are taught in whole-class, group and individual settings, as appropriate. The lessons observed had very good pace, direction and focus. A balance is maintained between oral and written work. Lesson content is effectively and creatively linked to the experience and environment of the pupils. Pupils demonstrate very good reasoning, estimating and communicating skills. Resources, when available, are used to very good effect, with pupils being given varied opportunities to engage in hands-on activities with concrete materials. Very good questioning to determine understanding, as well as good emphasis on consolidation and revision, ensure very good learning outcomes for pupils.

Cross-curricular activities are used effectively to support and consolidate children’s understanding of Mathematics. One lesson linking Mathematics with Drama was observed during the evaluation. Detailed and informative individual records of progress are maintained. Additional emphasis on differentiation would promote even higher attainments for some pupils.

Drama
The quality of teaching and learning in Drama is satisfactory, but there is much scope for development. Planning for Drama at whole school level is comprehensive and embraces all key elements of the drama curriculum. A review of the drama programmes being implemented in most classes in the school. All members of staff accept that Drama is at an early stage of development and are very enthusiastic about prioritising the development of this curricular area in the future. It is recommended that the staff focuses now on how best to implement the whole-school plan in their ongoing classroom practice.

The lessons observed were of a good standard. They demonstrated use of relevant drama techniques and showed awareness of the elements of Drama, in line with the curriculum. Notwithstanding this effective teaching, there was a sense during the evaluation that these were isolated lessons. In the majority of classes, pupils showed little evidence of having established a shared drama contract and being used to adhering to protocols specific to Drama. Many pupils were, for example, quite talkative in their groups while observing other groups. They were also unsure of transitional activities between various drama games. In general, there was an over-use of these games, with unclear learning objectives, in most lessons.

One very good lesson on exploring the stages of the life of Saint Patrick was observed during which different groups made freeze frames of specific aspects of his life. This type of approach should be extended. Teachers could adopt a theme for a defined period of time and explore that theme through Drama. At this juncture, it would be helpful to base much of the teaching on a text—for example, a story, a poem or a digital text—that would serve as a starting point for learning. As teachers and pupils grow in confidence, the emphasis can shift to story-making and a more in-depth exploration of the elements of Drama. All classes should implement an agreed drama contract; this would help to establish agreed protocols for all stages of the lessons. Drama techniques, when used, need to be more explicitly taught.
4.8 Assessment
The quality of assessment is satisfactory, but there remains potential to develop aspects of this area significantly. A range of appropriate screening tests is used throughout the school. Assessment tools in use by teachers include teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks, regular spelling tests, effective feedback to pupils and the monitoring of pupils’ work on a continual basis.

Standardised tests in both English and Mathematics are administered on a regular basis. High scores are being attained by many pupils in these tests. Some analysis and tracking of these scores is in evidence. The information accruing from this analysis should now be used to plan appropriate programmes of work for the pupils. This recommendation applies, in particular, to the many very able pupils present in this school. In view of low standards in Irish observed in some classes, it is recommended that pupils’ competencies be tracked across the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Teaching should, then, be adjusted accordingly. All test results are recorded and filed appropriately.

It is reported that formal parent-teacher meetings are held once a year and that parents are issued with an annual school report. Parents’ association officers indicated, however, that not all reports issued last year. It is very important that all deficiencies in this regard be addressed and that future practice adhere to policy.

5. Quality of Support for Pupils

5.1 Pupils with special educational needs
The quality of teaching of pupils with special educational needs is high. A comprehensive school policy guides this support. It lists the diagnostic tests, resources, approaches and strategies to be used. The quality of expertise and commitment displayed in the learning support context is of the highest standard. The classes observed in this context included dynamic, instructive and powerful teaching of both literacy and numeracy. While lessons in the resource context used innovative and stimulating approaches, they now need to link oral work to literacy and ensure enhanced connection between activities. Exemplary planning is a feature of all support provision. Very detailed and challenging individual programmes of work have been drawn up for identified pupils and all record-keeping is of a very high standard.

Notwithstanding the good practice observed in these support contexts, pupils are receiving support whose scores on standardised tests indicate that they have no need for this service. Instead of this, these pupils require a differentiated approach to learning in the mainstream setting. It was also noted that some pupils attend the learning support teacher as well as the resource teacher and/or receive additional support in both Mathematics and English. This provision is excessive and does not foster an integrated approach to learning for these pupils.

A significant number of pupils receive learning support on an individual basis. This approach does not meet the identified social needs of many of these children and should be discontinued. Many of these pupils are from fifth and sixth class. The needs of some of these children would, in many cases, be met more effectively by adopting a team-teaching/in-class approach. In general, therefore, the principles outlined in the Guidelines for Special Education should be adhered to when making decisions about the allocation, retention and discontinuance of pupils in special education in this school.
Some review of the work of the two special needs assistants (SNAs) is required. At present, this provision may be inhibiting the independent working of the assigned pupils. There is a need to allocate special education as a distinct responsibility to one special duties post-holder and to extend the current function from merely taking responsibility for assessment to embracing all elements of special education.

5.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
The inclusive environment of the school ensures that all pupils have equality of access to the full range of school activities. This school is part of the School Completion Programme, based in Ardee Community School, and has access to an after-schools club. There is evidence that effective policies are being implemented in relation to supporting pupils in the transfer to second-level school.

5. CONCLUSION
The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The members of the current board of management work decisively and conscientiously and they are very much focused on school improvement.
- The teaching of Mathematics is of a very high standard, with good outcomes of learning being achieved by many pupils.
- The quality of teaching in special education contexts is of a high standard; exemplary planning and individual programmes for learning are in place.
- The results of standardised tests indicate that there are many very able pupils in the school.

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

- A meaningful link must be created between whole-school planning and classroom practice; this process should be led by the principal and an action plan should be agreed.
- The principal should assume greater responsibility for leading development in teaching and learning; in doing this, particular attention must be paid to meeting the needs of the more able pupils in the school.
- As a priority, the board must ensure that the duties of the principal in regard to the maintenance of official school records are discharged satisfactorily.
- The board should ensure that the school is in full compliance with the terms of Primary Circular 11/95, Time in School. In doing this, the time allocated to Religious Instruction and to daily breaks should be reviewed.
- The procedures around dealing with parental complaints need to be clarified and shared with all parties.
- Efforts must be made to raise standards in all language skills in Irish across the school and to improve the skills of certain pupils in written English. To this end, the emphasis on workbook-based assignments should be reduced.
- The principles outlined in the Guidelines for Special Education should be adhered to when making decisions about the allocation, retention and discontinuance of pupils in special education in this school.

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

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