An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Joseph’s Girls’ National School
Clonakilty, Co. Cork
Uimhir rolla: 07651G

Date of inspection: 21 January 2011
1. Introduction

St. Joseph’s Girls’ National School is a catholic school under the patronage of the Bishop of Cork and Ross. It is a ten teacher school catering for 237 pupils. Attendance levels are, generally, high and the school adopts effective enrolment practices which are in line with National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and Departmental guidelines. The board of management of the school 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.

The school participates in the Department of Education & Skills Modern Languages Project and a number of programmes such as the An Taisce Green Flag project, The Discover Primary Science initiative, Experience Engineering 2011 and the ‘Incredible Edibles’ project.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the main strengths of the work of the school:

- The board of management oversees the work of the school in an effective manner.

- Effective channels of communication exist between the board, the staff, the parents’ association and the wider community.

- A broad and balanced curriculum is provided for and there is a creditable emphasis on the holistic development of all pupils.

- The school building, completed in 1967, is well maintained and resource provision in support of teaching and learning is adequate in almost all curricular areas.

- The principal and staff work professionally and diligently to provide all pupils with the skills and attributes to achieve their full potential.

The following main recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the board consult with relevant professionals to examine the possibilities of maximising the potential of the existing building and improve access to the school.

- It is recommended that a continuing professional development (CPD) plan be devised for the school to build on the strengths of existing staff members and to further develop internal capacity in support of the developmental needs of pupils.

- It is recommended that the school prioritise the purchase of additional reading materials in English and in Irish and further develop strategies to promote reading for pleasure as a key learning objective.

- It is recommended that the board and the parents’ association continue to highlight the importance of the school in the community in order to maximise the use of the educational opportunities provided.
3. **Quality of School Management**

- The board of management provides effective guidance and support to the school community. Members are well informed with regard to the role of the board and bring a broad range of complementary skills and experiences to bear on the work of the school community. Meetings are held frequently and minutes are recorded efficiently. The board has facilitated the setting up of a parents' association. Great care is taken in the management of the financial affairs of the school and accounting practices are very good. Questionnaires issued to all parents of children in the school indicated the school had a good reputation in the community (90%) and that almost all parents (94%) considered the school to be well run and a safe place (97%) for their children.

- The principal is assisted in the in-school management of the school by the deputy principal and three additional special duties' post-holders. Specific duties are delegated to individual members of the in-school management team and these, generally, reflect the teaching and learning priorities of the school and are in keeping with Departmental guidelines and best practice. In order to further improve existing practice, it is advised that duties of post-holders be reviewed at the start of each school year and adjusted, when necessary, to reflect evolving school priorities.

- The board of management of the school employs an administrative principal, nine classroom teachers, two resource/learning support teachers, one learning support teacher, one resource post for travellers on a shared basis and one teacher of English as an additional language. All staff members are professional and work diligently to support the learning needs of pupils. In order to further develop the professional capacity of the school staff, it is advised that the board explore the possibility of further engagement with local support services personnel and with their local Education Centre with a view to linking, where possible, the CPD of staff to evolving whole-school objectives. The board should also consider supporting, where possible, the accredited professional development of staff members in agreed areas that are reflective of the vision and learning objectives of the school.

- The board employs one full-time and one part-time special needs assistant (SNA) as well as a school secretary. All contribute positively to the effective running of the school.

- In addition to recognised posts, the board employs a number of additional tutors in French, Music, and Drama and avail of the services of a GAA coach under the terms of a local GAA club coaching initiative. These are partly funded by voluntary contributions from parents and through participation in the Department's Modern Languages Initiative for Primary Schools. It is recommended that the board consider the advantages of linking the work of external tutors with staff development programmes, in order to further up-skill teachers and avoid the possibility of disempowerment in the associated curricular areas.

- Resource provision in the school is good in most of the curricular areas and most parents (82%) are happy with current facilities. Departmental grant allocations are used effectively to resource the school and are supplemented, when necessary, by additional funds from the board and from the school parents' association. Recent investment has been in the area of ICT provision and all classrooms have been provided with interactive whiteboards and laptops. Training in the effective use of ICT in teaching and learning is a school priority for the current year. Other resources provided recently by the parents' association include playground games to support the PE curriculum and 'Buddy Benches' for all classrooms to assist in the delivery of the SPHE curriculum.
In order to further improve the management of resources, it is advised that future resource provision be linked to assessment and self-evaluation as well as to staff professional development, where possible. It is now recommended that priority be given to the acquisition of additional reading material in both English and Irish for all class levels and that this initiative be linked to appropriate reading interventions such as Literacy Lift-off.

- The school building, though well maintained, requires additional attention. It is a two-storey building, accessed through three separate stairways, and does not have a connecting corridor between classes on the upstairs floor. It is in close proximity to a second-level school, overlooks a housing estate and is adjacent to a vacant convent building. External space, though well developed, is restricted and the potential to expand is very limited. In addition, the entrance laneway is also used by the second-level school and traffic congestion and parking, at critical times, is an on-going issue. The improvement of access to the building might be a suitable short-term objective for the board. In the medium to longer term, it is advised that appropriate professional services be availed of in order to examine the feasibility of developing the building for optimal use in the future.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- Satisfactory whole school planning procedures are in place in the school and, in general, whole-school planning documents provide a useful guide to the work of the board, the staff and the parents’ association. Documents examined include administrative and curricular plans, minutes of board meetings and other official school correspondence. The board has been proactive in ensuring that the necessary collaborative process occurs with regard to the development and review of administrative plans and these are, when completed, put on public display in the entrance area. Curricular plans have been mainly developed following staff and in-school management meetings. This process is managed effectively by the principal and parental opinions are invited in some instances.

In order to further improve existing school planning practices, it is advised that a parents’ evening be held at the start of each school year at which the main learning outcomes for each class be outlined and the key methodologies explained.

- All teachers prepare long-term and short-term plans and maintain monthly progress records.

- Initial steps with regard to the analysis of standardised tests are noteworthy. The progress of individual classes is tracked with regard to the key areas of literacy and numeracy and, where possible, appropriate actions, such as division of classes or short-term intervention, have been taken to successfully reverse negative trends. Standardised test results are also used to identify pupil needs.

- School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools. Evidence was provided to show 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.
5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The quality of overall teaching in the school is very good, with ninety-six percent of parents surveyed concurring with this view, and all staff members work hard in support of each other and the agreed objectives of the school. The principal is a reflective and capable professional who recognises her role as instructional leader in the school and who endeavours to place teaching and learning at the heart of all school decisions and initiatives. Appropriate teaching methods are used and pupils are afforded a wide range of opportunities to become active agents in their own education.

There is a subtle emphasis of the achievement of high standards, although effort is also recognised and affirmed. General pupil achievement is satisfactory and questionnaires issued to parents indicate that there is solid community support for the school, whereby almost all parents (93%) stated they were happy with the school.

- Déantar iarraidh chreidiúnach caighdeán maith a bhaint amach i dtéagasc agus i bhfoghlaim na Gaeilge. Úsáidtear modhanna múinte oiriúnacha chun suim a chothú agus bunaítear na h-ábhair fhoghlaíma go rialta ar shuim agus ar thaithe na ndaltaí. Baintear úsáid as an nGaeilge mar mheán teagaisc sna ranganna Gaeilge agus go minic sna ranganna Corpus deachais. Léirionn formhór na ndaltaí tuiscint oiriúnach ar Ghaeilge bhunúsa aisc. Chún breis forbairthe a dhéanamh ar shaibhreas teanga na ndaltaí, moltar a thuilleadh deiseanna éisteachta a chur ar fáil do dhóibh, an scéaltaíochta a chleachtadh go rialta ag gach rang-leibhéil agus leabhair leabharlainne suimiúla ar chur ar fáil.

Moltar, chomh maith leath-bhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an bhpleanáil don Ghaeilge agus ar oiriúnachta a dhéanamh. D'úsáidtear an nGaeilge mar mheán teagaisc sna ranganna a Gaeilge agus go minic sna ranganna Corp deachais. Léirionn formhór na ndaltaí tuiscint oiriúnach ar Ghaeilge bhunúsa aisc. Chun breis forbairthe a dhéanamh ar shaibhreas teanga na ndaltaí, moltar a thuilleadh deiseanna éisteachta a chur ar fáil do dhóibh, an scéaltaíochta a chleachtadh go rialta ag gach rang-leibhéil agus leabhair leabharlainne suimiúla ar chur ar fáil.

- English is taught fruitfully in the school. Effective use is made of resources and suitable methodologies are used to develop the pupils’ language proficiency. Standardised tests indicate satisfactory progress in reading in almost all instances. Children with specific learning difficulties in English are well supported and there is an emphasis on early intervention. The written exercises of pupils indicate satisfactory development and there is a good balance between creativity, imagination and functional writing skills. The development of language across the curriculum was a notable feature of most of the lessons observed. In order to further develop language proficiency in the school, it is recommended that the provision of additional reading material be prioritised in the context of future resource provision and that some discretionary time be set aside for ‘reading for pleasure’ in the appropriate classes. It is also recommended that the staff, in
the course of future professional development planning, consider the advantages of adopting programmes such as First Steps, Literacy Lift-off or other similar programmes.

- Well structured lessons using suitable methodologies were a feature of Mathematics instruction in most of the lessons observed. Due emphasis is placed on active methodologies and on the use concrete materials. Pupils display satisfactory knowledge of facts and mathematical concepts. Standardised test scores in Mathematics indicate satisfactory results across the various curricular bands. In order to further improve curriculum provision in Mathematics, it is recommended that more be made of the environment in the exploration of mathematical concepts and that the use of calculators be promoted in senior classes.

It would also be beneficial to audit available mathematical equipment and to organise, during staff meetings, internal demonstrations as to the best use of such equipment, to further develop internal staff capacity and disseminate knowledge.

- History is taught effectively in the school and the use of textbooks is supplemented by some interesting local history projects. Time-lines are used to develop a sense of chronology and new technology is used effectively in the development of historical skills. Given that the school is currently reviewing whole school planning for History, it is advised that current practice be evaluated in the context of how well it reflects the breadth and balance of the curriculum and succeeds in developing pupil research skills through the exploration of the local environment.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Pupils with special educational needs are given additional help by a team of five experienced teachers. The majority of the support team have acquired relevant experience and some have had specific training in their respective areas of work. Current support categories include resource, learning support, English as an additional language and resource tuition for travellers. Support is on a withdrawal basis in almost all instances and individual education programmes are followed. Testing is an integral part of the work of the support team and there is an emphasis on clear diagnosis. A wide range of test instruments is used and the team has developed reasonable expertise in their use. A comprehensive range of programmes is followed and, in most instances, the quality of outcomes is very good. Records are well maintained and information is shared verbally with parents and guardians of participating pupils.

School policy with regard to special educational needs is currently under review. In that context, it is advised that a wider variety of intervention be implemented to include in-class and whole-class teaching. Written copies of IEPs, IPLPs and standardised tests should also be shared with parents/guardians.

It is also advised that dialogue between support teachers and mainstream class teachers be put on a more formal footing, where possible, and that the professional development needs of staff in these key areas be considered in line with emerging school CPD policy.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the endorsement in the report of the effectiveness of Board members, Principal and staff in delivering a holistic education to our pupils in a professional and diligent manner. We also welcome the opportunity given to parents to express their satisfaction with the school generally and to outline to the Cigrí the excellent work which the Parents’ Association does on behalf of the school.

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

In line with recommendations in the report, the school has, with significant financial support from the Parents’ Association, invested in reading materials for Senior Infants in a “Literacy Lift Off” programme. As recommended, support teachers assist in-class with this initiative. A similar initiative has been undertaken in 5th class and is planned for 2nd class. Additional materials have also been acquired for Maths and Irish.

Action on other recommendations, such as the opportunities for improvement to school access, and the development of a whole school CPD plan, is underway.