An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Joseph’s Convent National School
Skibbereen, County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 08430S

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Joseph’s NS, Skibbereen 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 History. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St Joseph’s NS, Skibbereen, is a catholic girls’ primary school under the trusteeship of the Sisters of Mercy. The patron of the school is the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

Official school documentation states that it is the intention of the school to, ‘…provide a well-ordered, caring, happy and secure atmosphere where the intellectual, spiritual, physical, moral and cultural needs of pupils are identified and addressed.’ The observed daily routines and practices of the school are in keeping with the above intentions.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management of the school is properly constituted, meets regularly and is fully cognisant of its management and leadership roles within the school community. The board oversees the administrative and financial affairs of the school in an efficient manner. A certified copy of the school accounts for 2008/09 was provided for examination during the evaluation.

The school, which was built in 1982, remains in excellent condition due to the diligence and commitment of successive boards. Departmental grants, annual capitation funds and locally raised voluntary contributions have been wisely invested in the premises. All internal and external spaces are well maintained. School development projects are an ongoing aspect of the work of the board and the health and safety of pupils is a priority.
1.3 In-school management

St. Joseph’s Convent NS is a twelve-teacher school with an administrative principal, 7 mainstream class teachers, 1 special class teacher, 1 learning-support teacher, 1 resource teacher and 1 teacher of English as an additional language. All positions are, currently, full time.

Traditionally, and until 1997 when the first lay principal was appointed, the school principal was a member of the Sisters of Mercy. The current lay principal was appointed in 2008. He is supported in his work by the in-school management team which includes the deputy principal and 4 special duties post holders, one of whom has privileged assistant status.

The advantages of restructuring and regularly reviewing the assigned duties of the in-school management team, in line with evolving school needs and Departmental guidelines, were discussed with the principal and staff during the evaluation. Willingness to change and review existing practices was noted during the interviews with the principal and the in-school management team.

It was apparent that a new leadership dynamic was emerging in the school at the time of the evaluation and that all partners were willing to embrace change in support of evolving whole-school objectives. Their success will be a significant factor in the changing context of the school given that the sisters of Mercy are in the process of transferring their trusteeship to the Diocese. The evolving trusteeship arrangements will, undoubtedly, put a greater degree of responsibility on individuals and will require firm, committed strategic management and leadership underpinned by mutual support and collegiality. Advice was given with regard to the above evolving contextual factors.

1.4 Management of resources

An important resource in St Joseph’s NS is the teaching staff and all are capable and committed professionals who work hard in their respective roles. Many have acquired substantial experience in particular curricular bands and some have been in their respective class settings for a considerable time. The benefits of formalising staff allocation and rotation policies so that all teachers might have the opportunity of experiencing a greater variety of classes and contexts on a more regular basis were discussed with the principal and staff. The need to formally develop school policy with regard to the professional development of teaching staff in line with evolving school needs was also discussed during the evaluation. In that regard the development of internal school expertise in the area of ICT has been a notable feature of the professional development of the staff in recent times.

In addition to the teaching staff the board employs a full-time secretary, 5 special needs assistants, a part-time caretaker, a part-time cleaner and a part-time escort. A number of external coaches work in the school and their expertise is used to develop key aspects of the Physical Education (gymnastics and dance), Music and Arts Education curricula. Some are funded through voluntary contributions from the Parents’ Association and others are provided for through collaborative curriculum focused projects led by the education officer of the West Cork Arts Centre in Skibbereen. All external coaches and tutors work within the boundaries of acceptable practice in line with board and Departmental guidelines with regard to child protection, health and safety and curricular provision.
Resource provision in support of teaching and learning is very good and the board, parents, principal and staff are to be complimented for their commitment to the creation of a stimulating, attractive and well-resourced school.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Good relationships exist between all partners and stakeholders in the school. Parents, for example, are recognised as key partners. They are involved in some aspects of policy development (code of behaviour, relationships and sexuality education (RSE), homework policy, policy on parental involvement, etc.), school functions, open days and induction days, religious ceremonies and pastoral events, paired reading programmes, a broad range of extra-curricular activities, fundraising and social events. Individual parents are consulted regularly with regard to pupil progress in line with Departmental guidelines and best practice. Grievances are dealt with in an appropriate and procedurally correct manner.

A formal, affiliated parents’ association plays an active part in the life of the school and representatives, who met the inspectors as part of the evaluation, expressed high levels of satisfaction with the democratic nature of the school community and with the quality of teaching and learning. A suggestion, arising from the meeting with parents’ association representatives, was the possibility of further integrating sporting activities within the school with broader community activity through liaison with specific local clubs and associations.

1.6 Management of pupils

Very good behaviour was observed in all class settings during the course of the evaluation. Pupils are, generally, articulate, good humoured and confident. Many exhibited high levels of self-esteem and a sense of pride in their school. The principal and the teachers are to be complimented for creating an ordered, pleasant learning environment in which appropriate teaching methodologies are effectively used and in which emphasis is placed on the holistic development of each pupil.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The whole-school planning process in the school conforms with Departmental expectations. A range of documentation was presented for evaluation. Organisational policies exhibit an understanding of the legislative context of primary education and a familiarity with Departmental guidelines and best practice. All policies had been ratified prior to the whole-school evaluation and within the evolving contextual factors outlined above (See section 1.3) an awareness existed of the need to review and re-conceptualise all administrative policies in partnership with all community partners and relevant stakeholders.

The fact that this process of review had begun was noted and it is recommended that all teaching staff be involved in this work. Curriculum plans have been drawn up in respect of all curricular areas. These plans reflect an awareness of the primary school curriculum and are a useful guide to classroom planning.
All teachers prepare long-term and short-term plans to guide them in their work. A variety of styles exist but, nonetheless, all are aware of the need to present their work in the form of outcomes-focused, age-appropriate and specific learning targets.

Records of pupils’ progress are recorded in *cuntais mhíosúla* and a file is maintained in the principal’s office. This practice is a means of maintaining relevant links between the work of individual teachers and a good measure of curriculum continuity was apparent from these records.

It is recommended that agreed long-term and short-term classroom planning templates which would refine, at class level, whole school learning objectives and further develop collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, be used in the future.

### 2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation, based on the official minutes of board meeting 11 February 2010, was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Skills Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s *Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools* (2001). A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have recently been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

It is recommended that a copy of the child protection procedures be given to all staff (including all new staff) and that management ensures that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed.

### 3. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

#### 3.1 Gaeilge

Moltar iarrachtaí fhoireann teagaisc na scoile dearcadh dearfach i leith an Ghaeilge a fhorbairt agus sonraítear caighdeán maith cainte ina measc féin. Léirítear na ceachtanna go h-éifeachtach agus cuirtear béim inmholta ar an labhairt. Mealltar na daltaí chun cainte go scilithe agus bhí atmaisfear fábhrach teagaisc don teang le sonrú i bhformhór na ranganna. Úsáideann straitéisí teagaisc oiriúnachais i bhformhór na gceachtanna agus chonaítradh cuid mhaith samplaí de theagasc a bhí ar chaighdeán ard le linn an fhiosruithe. Éagraítear deiseanna éisteachta do na daltaí, cuirtear béim ar an tréimhse iar-chumarsáideach sna ceachtanna, forbraítear na bun scileanna léitheoireachta agus sonraítear caighdeán maith scribhneoireachta sna hard-ranganna, ach go h-áirithe.

Chun an obair i dtéagasc na Gaeilge a fhóraí a thuilleadh moltar don bhfoireann úsáid bhreise a bhaint as an ndrámaíocht, as an gceol agus an fhilíocht chun an obair a shaibhriú agus chun suim sa teanga agus sa chultúr Gaelach a chothú. Moltar, chomh maith, ceachtanna nó téamaí oiriúnacha a bhí híathar uathúil a mhúineadh i níos mó chomhartha trí Ghaeilge, nuair is féidir, chun an chumarsáid a chur chun cinn a thuilleadh ar bhealach nádúrtha beo.

*Irish*

*The teaching staff of the school is to be complimented for developing a positive attitude to Irish and their individual language competency is good. Classes were presented effectively and an*
appropriate emphasis was placed on conversation. Pupils were skilfully encouraged to speak and a favourable attitude to Irish was apparent in the majority of classroom settings. Appropriate teaching strategies are used in most lessons and many examples of high-quality teaching were observed during the course of the evaluation. Listening opportunities are organised for the pupils, the communicative aspect of lessons is emphasised, key reading skills are developed and a high standard of written work was evidenced in the senior classes in particular.

To further develop the teaching of Irish it is advised that the staff should consider the advantages of integrating drama, music and art with language teaching with a view to further enhancing the work and developing an interest in cultural and historical aspects of the language. It is also advised that lesson topics or appropriate themes in particular subjects might be integrated with Irish, where possible, to further develop conversation naturally.

3.2 English

English is taught effectively in a structured, incremental way in the school. Pupils are articulate and confident and their standardised test scores (Micra-T) indicated satisfactory levels of achievement in reading. Good practice was observed in relation to the early identification of pupils with specific literacy needs. A range of appropriate and carefully managed collaborative intervention strategies, within specific time-frames, are used in that important context.

General classroom teaching methods are appropriate and effective. Language development is a key feature in many lessons and direct and indirect methods are often used to good effect. Pupils read with confidence and a wide variety of reading material is available throughout the school and in classroom libraries. Reading is further encouraged through effective collaborations with the local library and by involving parents in paired reading programmes.

The quality of pupils’ written work is high and the cumulative efforts of all teachers are apparent in the work of senior pupils. An appropriate balance is apparent between the traditional and process approaches to writing. Sufficient emphasis is placed on the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling without negatively impacting on pupil creativity and imagination. Appropriate emphasis on literacy development across the curriculum is a consistent and praiseworthy feature of the work of the school and structured whole-school collaborations and practices positively inform this important aspect of the work.

3.3 Mathematics

The teaching of Mathematics is undertaken capably at each class level. All of the strands of the curriculum are progressed in an incremental manner and basic skills and concepts are carefully explored using active methodologies in the lower and middle classes. In the senior classes, pupils display good knowledge of facts, of the language of mathematics and enjoy problem solving.

A wide range of manipulative materials is available throughout the school and is used effectively. Stimulating maths-rich environments have been developed at many class levels. The pupils present their work with due care and this is effectively and regularly monitored by the teachers.

Good quality teaching and learning in mathematics is a notable feature at many class levels in the school. Good foundations are laid in the infant classes and a gradual progression in the pupils’ skills of reasoning, estimating, predicting, calculating and problem solving is evident in the middle and senior classes.
3.4 History

History is taught effectively in the school and emphasis is placed on both content and skills. There is a suitable emphasis on developing an interest in the past and in exploring change and continuity. Appropriate curricular themes are explored and developed in an integrated manner. History classes are enlivened by effective use of ICT, music, poetry, drama and art. Many lessons observed were on the theme of St. Patrick and some good examples of integration and investigative work occurred.

A range of appropriate methodologies is used to develop an appreciation of the key role of History in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of people today. The lack of dependence on textbooks, the use of timelines and the effective use of appropriate teaching methodologies are important features of this work.

Whole-school and individual teacher planning for History conform to Departmental guidelines and expectations.

3.5 Assessment

A wide range of assessment practices inform teaching and facilitate learning in the school. This work is co-ordinated by the special educational needs team. A number of suitable test instruments are regularly used and there is an emphasis on early intervention and on the achievement of adequate levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy for all pupils before leaving primary school. Tests regularly used include, Micra-T, Sigma-T, MIST, Quest, Miscue Analysis, Rain Sentence Reading Test, Aston Index, Drumcondra Maths and Drumcondra English tests.

The progress of individual pupils is carefully recorded and this information is shared with the principal, the class teachers and with parents.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

St Joseph’s NS strives to serve all the children of the community without prejudice and substantial resources have been put in place to support that objective. Pupils with special educational needs are catered for by a team of 10 people. These include 1 learning-support teacher (LS), 1 resource teacher (RT), 1 special class teacher, 1 English as an additional language teacher (EAL), 5 special needs assistants (SNAs) and 1 bus escort.

School practices with regard to the integration of pupils with special educational needs are supported by written policies which are subject to regular review and rationalisation. These policies delineate roles and responsibilities and are a useful guide for staff, parents and management. A broad range of practice is used in support of these pupils and there is a commendable emphasis on collaboration, dialogue and information sharing.

At the time of the whole-school evaluation the quality of whole-school planning and of individual teacher planning was adequate and observed practices were effective, time-bound, target-driven and incorporated a broad range of appropriate methodologies. Included were, individual withdrawal, group work, in-class support, team teaching and whole-class teaching. All members
of the special educational needs team are to be commended for their dedication, professionalism and commitment.

A special needs class (Rang Naomh Eoin), set up in 1998 to provide education for pupils with severe and profound disability, is attached to the school. Prior to the evaluation the school had experienced an unexpected reduction in the number of pupils validly enrolled in the special class. Only one pupil was enrolled at the time of the evaluation. It was noted that the enrolment was not being operated in conformity with the school’s admission policy on children with special needs which stated the following: ‘…children with special needs, like children in mainstream classes, must leave the school at 13 years of age before they have reached their 14th birthday’.

It is advised that the school review and clarify this position to ensure that future practices conform to stated school policy.

There is also a need to clarify the enrolment policy with regard to the special class as Departmental records and official school policy documents are not, at this point in time, in harmony. It is necessary to clarify this situation, urgently, and to inform the relevant authorities.

Further advice was also given with regard to the benefit of regularly engaging with the broad range of partners and stakeholders involved in special needs provision in West Cork in order that strategy is discussed, information sharing is further facilitated and overall service provision is enhanced.

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

Specific additional supports were not required for pupils from disadvantaged, minority or other groups at the time of this external evaluation.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school has a long and distinguished tradition of service, care and education and is viewed positively by the local community.
- The board is effective and provides advice and support to the principal and staff and guidance to the wider school community.
- The principal, post-holders and all other teaching staff display an awareness of the challenges that lie ahead relating to the change management process.
- The school staff display a wide range of complementary skills and personal attributes which, when properly harnessed, will provide the basis for further growth and the development of a strategic perspective in support of high quality educational provision without the input of the Sisters of Mercy.
- There is a commendable emphasis on the achievement of high standards, through maximum effort, across a broad range of areas and all teaching staff work hard in support of that ideal.
The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

- It is recommended that the principal, in consultation with his teaching colleagues, identify the short-term to medium-term developmental needs of the school and develop strategies to ensure that teacher professional development programmes are in harmony with these targets.
- It is recommended that the board seeks immediate written clarification as to the official status of the attached special class (Rang Naomh Eoin) and to adjust staffing ratios and enrolment policies accordingly.
- It is recommended that the principal, in consultation with the board and other relevant partners, develop a strategic plan for Rang Naomh Eoin which seeks to maximise the use of current facilities and create a sustainable model of support into the future.
- It is recommended that the principal, in consultation with colleagues and other partners, begin the process of reviewing all whole-school planning documentation as a means of successfully preparing for, and adapting to, the new model of trusteeship which will emerge following the withdrawal of the Mercy Order from the day-to-day running of the school.

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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