Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Ahiohill National School
Enniskeane, County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 10243I

Date of inspection: 29 January 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Ahiohill NS was undertaken in January 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 Geography. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Ahiohill NS is one of six schools in the parish of Enniskeane and Desertserges in West Cork. It is a co-educational, rural parish school with three mainstream classes. 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>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The school, in keeping with the principles of Primary School Curriculum, follows a broadly-based, balanced, curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of all pupils.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management of the school is properly constituted and discharges its duties and responsibilities in a very effective manner. Members are fully informed with regard to all aspects of the work of the school, play an active role in policy formation, oversee the work of staff effectively, communicate effectively with the wider school community and provide excellent premises, appropriately resourced, in which to provide for teaching and learning.

The school was extensively renovated using Departmental funding in 2007 and is in excellent condition. The school grounds are well maintained and provide a safe and stimulating place for play and recreation. High levels of investment in appropriate resources, in support of teaching and learning across the curriculum, were noted. A high level of investment in ICT, including interactive whiteboards, was also evident and this equipment was observed to be used to good effect as a teaching and learning tool.
The daily practices and routines of the school indicated compliance with current legislation and with departmental regulations with regard to the length of the school year, the school day, the allocation of teachers, class size and the retention of pupils.

1.3 In-school management

The principal of Ahiohill NS has, since 1975, played an influential role in the effective leadership and management of the local school in its community. He articulates a strong and clear vision for school, has a keen sense of place, understands the critical importance of community-based education and is committed to high standards in teaching and learning. He has created a positive, healthy working environment in which staff and parents feel valued and affirmed, knowledge is shared, positive behaviour is promoted and the educational needs of the pupils are always put first.

The in-school management team includes the deputy principal and one additional post-holder. All duties have been assigned in line with departmental guidelines and are subject to review. Meetings are held, formally, once per term. Informal dialogue also occurs on a regular basis. Mutual support and collegiality are significant aspects of the in-school management practices in the school and a positive, productive team orientation exists.

1.4 Management of resources

The board of management of Ahiohill NS employs four teachers. Three of the teachers are assigned mainstream class duties in line with current departmental regulations and one is employed as a learning support/resource teacher for pupils with special educational needs. This post is shared with two adjoining parish schools. Ahiohill has an allocation of 0.51 under the general allocation model of provision. Additional support (7.5 hours), under the general allocation model, is provided through a clustering arrangement with another parish school where that position is based.

All staff members have been in their respective class settings for a number of years and they are well suited to the professional roles to which they have been assigned. Some opportunities are provided for teachers to experience a variety of classes and contexts through school practices with regard to local history, storytelling, ICT and film projects, sport, music and performance arts. This collaborative approach might be further extended to include additional curricular areas and all teaching staff members.

All teaching staff members are committed to professional development and the school has a formal policy with regard to staff development supported by the board. 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 a part-time secretary and a part-time caretaker are employed. Both perform their duties to a high standard of efficiency. A number of external tutors are used to deliver aspects of the curriculum in certain subjects. These include GAA, rugby, gymnastics, swimming and hockey coaches and an Irish dancing tutor. All external coaches work within the boundaries of the school curriculum as indicated by individual teacher planning documents. They have Garda clearance certificates and are confined to definite timeframes which do not, where possible, overlap.
Excellent standards of accommodation exist in the school. There are four mainstream classes, a learning-support room, a resource room, a general purpose room, an office, a staff room and a library, a spacious attic space adapted for use as a project display area, and adequate storage space. Additional temporary prefabricated accommodation on the school site is used to house a Montessori pre-school and an after-school club. An adjacent parish hall is available to the school when required. Departmental grants and locally generated funds have been used to good effect to acquire a broad range of educational resources and equipment and the school is a well resourced and suitable premises for teaching and learning. External spaces are well maintained and include an all-weather area and a playing field.

The effective use of the current school resources and the maintenance of accommodation is a stated objective of the current board and they are in the process of upgrading the ICT infrastructure on a phased basis.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Home-school-community relationships are very good and a strong sense of local identity and community is evident. The board and the parents’ representatives on the board expressed satisfaction with the educational provision in the school, with the quality of teaching, and with the breadth and balance of the curriculum on offer.

The board makes every effort to communicate effectively with the general body of parents. The school invites all parents to regular meetings in order to ascertain their views. Pupils’ records are shared with parents and guardians, formal written reports are issued annually and an end-of-year school report is presented to the parents. Parents’ representatives expressed satisfaction with regard to the format and frequency of information on pupils’ attainment and with the frequency of informal and formal parent-teacher interactions.

Though a pro-active parents’ association exists within the school community they have not affiliated with the National Parents’ Association (NPC). Advice was given to the school with regard to the benefits of affiliation with the NPC.

1.6 Management of pupils

Very good relationships exist at all levels within the school community. Pupils respond positively to the effective use of appropriate teaching methodologies and to the consistent use of praise and positive reinforcement. The school’s commitment to the pastoral care of all the pupils is evident from the broad range of extra-curricular opportunities on offer. Their sense of place and responsibility are effectively developed by their participation in and celebration of local traditions, customs and community and religious events. Visitors to the school are made feel welcome by management, staff, parents and pupils.
2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The whole-school planning process in Ahiohill NS conforms with Departmental guidelines and best practice and a comprehensive range of documentation was presented for evaluation. All curricular and administrative policies have been ratified by the board, following a broad consultative process in which parents are given the opportunity to make an input. These policies are subject to periodic review. Planning documents reflect the unique context of the school and are consistent with the stated aims and objectives of the Primary School Curriculum.

All teaching staff prepare long-term and short-term plans and record learning achievements in a monthly progress record. Though a variety of individual planning practices exist all were consistent with whole-school planning and in conformity with curriculum principles.

It is recommended that agreed long-term and short-term planning templates be developed and used which would facilitate consistency, at class level, in the implementation of whole-school learning objectives across the curriculum.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation 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). 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. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 English

Literacy development is an important educational goal and standardised test results (Micra-T) indicate very good levels of achievement for pupils given the broad mix of abilities in the school.

In addition, many pupils were observed to read with ease, accuracy and fluency and their written work was of a good standard. Appropriate strategies are employed to develop the aural, oral, reading and writing skills of pupils and those experiencing difficulties are adequately supported by class teachers and by the special educational needs team. Vocabulary is taught directly and indirectly, i.e. word definitions before reading a text and general exposure to language across the curriculum.

Junior classes are provided with ample opportunity to develop their oral language through conversation, story-telling, use of Big Books, structured reading and writing activities, word
recognition skills, phonological awareness activities, poetry and rhyme. As pupils progress, developing fluency and the ability to construct meaning from words is assessed through listening to pupils read aloud from appropriate texts and through the discussion of content. Reading is encouraged by providing print-rich environments and a suitable supply of different texts which promote reading for many different purposes. Comprehension skills are developed through tasks and activities. Additional strategies, such as paired reading, which foster links with parents, are used to good effect, where appropriate. Pupils are encouraged to write in a variety of genres and written work on display was of a high standard. Writing skills, spellings, punctuation and grammar are developed incrementally across the classes.

Advice was given to the school with regard to the possibility of formalising the existing good practice into a whole-school literacy strategy which would develop further a culture of reading and of library use among pupils.

3.2 Gaeilge

Cuirtear na ceachtanna sa Ghaeilge i láthair go brí omhar, spreagúil agus mealltar na daltaí chun suime go héifeachtach. Bunaítear an t-ábhar foghlama ar théamaí a bhaineann le saol na ndaltaí agus baintear úsáid as sraith teáseleabhar mar thaca sa teagasc agus san fhoghlaíomh. Úsáidtear an Ghaeilge go neamhfhoirmiúil go laethúil sa scoil agus is inmholta mar a labhraíonn na hoidí i nGaeilge agus iad ag tabháirt treoracha i rith an lae. Léiríonn na ndaltaí tuisceart oiriúnaigh a Ghaeilge bhunúsach.

Úsáidtear modh na scéalaíochta chun scileanna éisteachta na ndaltaí a fhorbairt agus úsáidtear ábhar léirithe agus fearas corpartha chun tuisceart na ndaltaí ar fhoclóirí agus a fhorbairt. Cleachtar cluichí éagsúla, gníomhaochtaí cainte agus obair i bpéiriogóirí go héifeachtach mar mhodhaanna múinte nuair a oireann siad. Cuirtear béim chuí ar bhun-scileanna na léitheoireachta a fhorbairt trasna na scoile agus léann na daltaí go cruinn agus le tuisceart.

Chun an dea-chelechatais seo a fhorbairt a thuilleadh moltar breis deiseanna éisteachta a chur ar fáil, breis priosta a chur ar taispeáint agus cnuaasach de leabhair oiriúnacha a chur ar fáil i ngach rang chun taithí níos lethne litéitheoreachta a chothú.

Irish

Irish classes are presented in a lively, interesting manner and pupils are stimulated effectively. Learning content is based on themes that relate to the lives of pupils and a scheme of textbooks is used to support teaching and learning. Irish is used informally in the school and its use by teachers in giving direction throughout the school day is commendable. Pupils display an appropriate understanding of basic Irish.

Storytelling is used to develop the listening skills of pupils and visual resources and concrete materials are used to consolidate pupils’ understanding of new vocabulary. Pair work, games and other communication activities are used effectively as teaching methodologies when appropriate. Basic reading skills are developed effectively across the school and pupils read fluently and with understanding.

Existing good practice might be further enhanced by extending the range of strategies used to develop listening skills, by the provision of additional printed material in Irish and by providing additional age-appropriate books and reading material to extend the reading experience of pupils in Irish.
3.3 Mathematics

The quality of mathematics teaching observed during the course of the whole-school evaluation was good. Pupils demonstrated very good levels of understanding with regard to basic concepts and adequate mastery of the relevant skills. Appropriate teaching methodologies were used and a comprehensive range of equipment and mathematical aids, including ICT, was available in all classes. Manipulative materials are used purposefully in lower classes to facilitate pupil understanding and, when necessary, as pupils progress and grow intellectually. There is a considerable emphasis on connecting mathematics education with the environment (money, budgeting, shopping, measurement and data) and on understanding and interpreting information in a practical way. The stated goals of mathematics education in senior classes are to prepare pupils for further studies in mathematics and science and in other related areas in post-primary school and beyond, to develop deductive reasoning skills and to generate a lively interest in the subject. Results of standardised testing (Sigma-T tests) indicate very good levels of achievement in mathematics and parents expressed satisfaction with the standard of mathematics education in the school.

3.4 Geography

There was a considerable and commendable emphasis on developing a sense of place in the school. Local and cultural studies form a large part of the educational programme in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) and were observed to be explored to good effect in an integrated manner. This was particularly evident in an impressive array of local cultural projects. Fieldwork and investigative skills are used to explore the local environment and pupils demonstrate a keen sense of place supported by a clear understanding of national and European influences on the development of their community.

Geography classes are appropriately resourced and maps, assorted globes and appropriate software are used to enliven the study of the Earth, its inhabitants and the inter-relationships between them. Project work, construction, ICT and film are some of the strategies successfully employed to stimulate interest in Geography and to develop the associated investigative skills of a geographer. An appropriate balance was observed between content, concepts and skills in the context of geography education at all levels within the school community. The knowledge base of pupils was considerable in senior classes and all classes demonstrated a good sense of place.

3.5 Assessment

A wide range of assessment modes is used to facilitate learning in the school. These include, teacher observation, frequent dialogue, diagnostic testing and the appropriate use of standardised test instruments. Formal test instruments in use are diagnostic and standardised in form and include Micra-T, Sigma-T, MIST test, Quest test, NRIT, Diagnostic Reading Analysis and the Early Literacy Test.

Meticulous record-keeping is the norm and test results are used to inform whole-school and classroom planning and information is shared with parents and guardians.
4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Pupils with special educational needs are capably supported by two, part-time Learning Support/Resource teachers. Both positions are shared and one is based in the school. A total of 20.25 hours support teaching is available to the school.

Support teachers work collaboratively with each other and with mainstream class teachers and provide a range of targeted interventions for low-incidence, high-incidence and for newcomer children with cognitive language deficiencies. Their work is characterised by effective planning and excellent record keeping. Individual and occasional group withdrawal methods are the key methodologies employed and there is a commendable focus on literacy and numeracy as key cornerstones of learning. Adequate resource provision exists to support supplementary teaching and ICT is used purposefully with regard to specific intervention strategies.

It is recommended that the support teaching team further develop their work practices by engaging in more whole-class teaching or suitable in-class support activities.

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

Dedicated provision for pupils from disadvantaged, minority or other groups was not required in the school at the time of the evaluation.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is a key focal point in the area and reflects the customs, traditions, practices, aspirations and expectations of the local community.
- The school has an effective and pro-active board of management, high levels of community support and excellent standards of accommodation and resource provision in support of teaching and learning.
- The principal has the respect and trust of colleagues and the school community and articulates a clear and consistent vision for the school which demonstrates a genuine interest in the lives of all the pupils.
- The teaching staff are dedicated and capable and there is a commendable commitment to the achievement of high standards of education.

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

- It is recommended that the school positively exploit the opportunities for collaborative teaching methodologies that exist within the small rural school context.
- It is recommended that the teaching staff explore the development of common templates for long-term and short-term classroom planning with a view to promoting further consistency in addressing whole-school objectives.
• It is recommended that the special educational needs team engages in a wider range of methodologies that might include whole-class teaching or in-class support as possible strategies.
• It is recommended that the parents’ association formalise its activities by affiliation with the National Parents’ Council (NPC).

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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