Whole School Evaluation REPORT

Ballymana National School
Ballymana, Co. Galway
Uimhir rolla: 106750

Date of inspection: 7 December 2011
1. Introduction

Ballymana National School is a co-educational rural school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Galway. It is situated approximately five kilometres from Craughwell, Co. Galway. At the time of the evaluation the school had 135 pupils and the staff comprised five mainstream teachers, a learning-support/resource teacher, a visiting resource teacher and a part-time secretary.

This whole-school evaluation focused on the teaching and learning in Gaeilge, English, Mathematics and Music. 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The outgoing board of management functioned in a very effective manner.
- The school has a vibrant parents’ association and parents play an active role in the life of the school.
- Good standards pertain in all the curricular areas evaluated.

The following main recommendations are made:

- The board should consider issuing an annual report on the work of the school.
- The curricular policies in the school plan require further development.
- There is a need to implement a whole-school approach to the development of phonological and phonemic awareness.

3. Quality of School Management

- During the course of the evaluation a new board assumed responsibility for the management of the school. The outgoing board functioned in a very effective manner, successfully overseeing a major building project, the formulation of school policies, the provision of resources and the resolution of major school issues. Future priorities have been identified and the new board should consider these and draw up a long-term action plan to guide its own work.

- The principal and deputy principal form the in-school management team. They work effectively together in managing the day-to-day running of the school. They regularly collaborate with the rest of the staff in reaching decisions on school organisation, policy development, curricular content and classroom practice. The team should now assume a leading role in establishing a formal process of whole-school self-evaluation whereby whole-school curricular targets are set, progress in achieving those targets is periodically evaluated and classroom practice is reviewed accordingly.
The quality of the management of resources is very good. Due regard is given to professional development and teachers have opportunities to work at different class levels and in different roles. It would be timely now to consider participation in some of the leadership programmes currently available for teachers. A policy on continuing professional development should also be developed.

The board has devoted considerable time and effort to enhancing the school premises. The school provides high quality accommodation although it lacks a hall and indoor sports facilities. Outside there is a large grass area, a small specially equipped playground and a number of small, narrow hard-surface areas. The possibility of developing an appropriately sized hard-surface play area and of improving car-parking facilities is currently under investigation. It is praiseworthy that the board permits the use of the school by outside personnel thereby supplementing teacher-organised after-school activities and facilitating the running of an Irish summer camp.

The board has managed relations and communications with the school community with care and sensitivity. The practice of agreeing, at each board meeting, the information that can be shared with the school community is firmly established. The board and parents' association have collaborated very successfully to raise funds and to develop the school premises. Parents regularly assist with school event and they are very supportive of their children's involvement in the school's broad programme of after-school activities. To enhance the flow of information to parents, the board should consider issuing an annual report on the work of the school.

The quality of the management of pupils is good. Pupils present as very friendly, responsive and interested in their work. They are provided with opportunities to engage in a wide range of activities including Irish cultural events, the Green Schools initiative, Gaelic games, athletics, chess, drama, choral singing and playing musical instruments.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

The school plan contains a range of appropriate organisational and curricular policies. The curricular policies require further development in order to delineate clearly the content to be taught at each class level. Parents could also be more fully involved in the planning process.

All teachers prepare long-term and short-term plans, maintain monthly records of the work covered and use a number of techniques to assess pupil progress. Teachers should now work collaboratively to review classroom practice, to analyse test results and to formulate time-bound whole-school targets with the explicit purpose of improving the quality of pupils' experience and their standards of attainment.

The board should also engage in analysing the school's overall performance in order to be in a position to monitor progress in achieving school improvement, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.
5. **Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement**

- The overall quality of teaching and learning is good. Technology is very proficiently used in the presentation of lessons. Team teaching features at some class levels. There is scope for more widespread and more frequent use of group work and of activity-based approaches in order to provide appropriately differentiated experiences for the pupils.

- Tá dearcadh an-dearfhach i leith na Gaeilge i measc phobal na scoile. Cloítear go dílis leis an gcur chuige cumarsáideach chun an teanga a mhúineadh. Baineann talnemh, éagsúlacht agus cruthaitheacht le go leor de na hirmeachtaí. Léirionn na daltaí tuiscint mhaith ar a bhuil dhéanta agus sroicheann siad caighdeán réasúnta maith sna ceithre scil teanga. Múinteart cuasach breá amhrán agus dánta agus seantheadh an fhonn stáin ó rang a dó ar aghaidh. Is inmholta mar a ghlacann an soil pait i gcomórtas agus in imeachtáí a raachtáitear sa cheantar chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Ní mór féachaint chuige anois go dtugtar faoi réimse níos leithne teanga a mhúineadh, go gcúirtear ar chumas na ndaltaí bhríthra a iomrascán, tuairiscí a scríobh agus scéalta a cheapadh as a stuaim féin. B’fhéidir freisin infeistíú a chéile i dtuilleadh anseo léitheoireachta agus leas a bhaint as scrúdaithe caighdeánacha chun éifeacht an teagaisc a mheas.

*There is a very positive attitude towards Irish in the school community. Teachers adhere faithfully to the communicative approach to teach the language. Enjoyment, variety and creativity are features of many of the activities. The pupils display a good understanding of what has been covered and they attain reasonably good standards in the four language skills. A lovely collection of songs and poems is taught and the tin whistle is played from second class onwards. It is praiseworthy that the school participates in competitions and events that are organised in the area in order to promote Irish. The teachers should now ensure that a broader range of language is taught and that pupils are enabled to contend with verbs, to write reports and to compose stories on their own initiative. It would also be of value to invest in more reading materials and to use standardised tests to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching.*

- English is well taught. Play, story, poetry, drama and project work are used to very good effect to enrich language ability. The recitation of poetry is impressive in many classes and it is recommended that all classes should be exposed to a rich repertoire of poetry and should be enabled to memorise and recite poetry. Print-rich classroom environments and attractive class libraries support the teaching of reading. While engaged in reading, the pupils tend to rely heavily on pictorial, semantic and syntactic cues to identify words. There is scope to develop a more uniform and consistent approach to developing phonological and phonemic awareness so that pupils can also confidently draw on their knowledge of sound-letter relationships as a strategy for word identification. Pupils are provided with ample opportunities to write in different genres and for different audiences. There is a need to focus attention on correct letter formation, posture and pencil grip and to implement a whole-school approach to the teaching of cursive handwriting.

- The curriculum in Mathematics is competently implemented. Guided discovery methods, talk and discussion, emphasis on mathematical language and the use of concrete materials are facets of the good practice observed. A more structured approach to the teaching of number facts is required at some class levels to aid memorisation and recall. There is also scope to create practical mathematics areas and to develop more mathematics-rich classroom environments. The recording of mathematical computations and solutions to problems is monitored very closely in some instances and this practice should be strengthened on a whole-school basis.
There is a high level of musical expertise on the staff and all strands of the music curriculum are very competently taught. Carefully chosen musical excerpts are used to engage pupils in listening and responding activities. Pupils approach composition tasks with confidence. Song singing is of a very high standard with the repertoire encompassing call-and-response songs, chants, raps, canons, hymns, songs from different cultures, songs with rhythm and modal ostinato and songs with two-part harmonies. The school choir performs on a regular basis at church ceremonies and also participates in national choral initiatives. Pupils play the tin whistle musically and many also avail of other instrumental lessons provided on the premises after school. While elements of music literacy are addressed at each class level, the teachers should strive to develop their own school-based programme that would incorporate the use of pentatonic tunes and would be linked with the song singing and instrumental repertoires.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

The quality of support for pupils is of a high standard. The support provision encompasses early intervention at senior infant level, supplementary teaching in English and Mathematics organised on a withdrawal basis, team teaching in mainstream classrooms and the withdrawal of pupils to address their individual needs. While group and individual learning programmes incorporate very clearly stated learning targets there is a need in some instances to clarify the baseline from which the programmes commence. Teaching activities are very effectively structured and paced and praiseworthy attention is given to preparing high quality, attractive and engaging learning materials. Consideration should now be given to commencing early intervention at junior infant level, to extending team-teaching and in-class support and to supporting the implementation of a whole-school approach to the development of phonological and phonemic awareness.

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