Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Brendan’s Primary School
Birr, Co. Offaly
Roll Number: 12370C

Date of inspection: 21 January 2011
1. Introduction

St Brendan’s Primary School is a mainstream school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Killaloe. It is situated in Birr, Co Offaly and caters for the boys of the town. Currently there are seventeen full-time teachers and one part-time teacher on staff. The school employs three full-time and one part-time special needs assistants, a secretary and caretaker. At the time of the evaluation there were 238 pupils on roll. The school is included in the Department of Education and Skills’ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The school is a supportive environment where the pastoral care of pupils operates to a high standard.
- The school’s organisational systems are very effective.
- A number of very successful whole-school initiatives in areas such as literacy, special educational needs and parental involvement are implemented and impact very positively on pupils’ learning.
- The school has a suite of very good quality curriculum plans.
- Teachers are competent and capable in their teaching and display an interest in and a commitment to the school.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Group work should be implemented at all levels throughout the school in English and Mathematics.
- The link between planning, teaching and assessment in mainstream and special educational needs settings should be strengthened.
- A whole-school approach to oral language development in English should be implemented.
- Ba chúir go gcuirfi ar chumas na daltaí fíorchumasáid a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Pupils should be enabled to communicate naturally in Irish.
- The school should review its practice in regard to programme planning and record keeping for pupils with special educational needs.
3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management provides good governance to the school. It meets frequently and considers a broad range of issues at its meetings. An agreed report should become a standard item at all board meetings and its contents disseminated to the school community. Other avenues of raising awareness of the work of the board amongst the school community should also be investigated.

- The school has significant strengths in terms of organisational and pastoral leadership. The principal and in-school management team discharge their duties in these domains very competently and ensure that the school is well run and that a positive climate prevails.

- The school is now advised to increase the emphasis on instructional leadership. Key initiatives in this area should include strengthening the link between planning, teaching and assessment, implementing a whole-school approach to teaching methodologies, the mentoring of newly appointed staff, ensuring breadth and balance in curriculum provision and engaging in regular self-evaluation. Duties of post holders should be reviewed to reflect this priority.

- The school has a parents’ association which provides valuable support and assistance to the school. The association should consider the advantages of affiliating to the National Parents’ Council – Primary.

- Relationships between parents and teachers are open and welcoming. Almost all parents, in their responses to questionnaires administered as part of this evaluation, feel that the school welcomes parents and express a high level of satisfaction with arrangements for parent teacher meetings and school reports.

- The management of pupils is very effective. The school deals very successfully with a variety of diverse and challenging needs and nurtures a holistic approach to its pupils. Consideration could be afforded to initiatives that would afford pupils a say in general school affairs.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- Administrative policies are clear and well-written. The school is advised to review its learning-support policy, assessment policy, record keeping policy and enrolment policy. The school is also encouraged to provide parents with access to a broader range of policies.

- Very good quality curriculum plans are available for English and Mathematics. The Irish plan provides good guidance on appropriate methodologies for each class level. A section on appropriate content across the four strands would enhance the quality of this plan. In developing the science plan a two-year programme for the implementation of strands and strand units should be outlined and greater guidance provided on pupils’ skills development.

- There is scope to improve the quality of individual teacher planning. It is advised therefore that the school’s curricular plans form the basis for long-term planning in mainstream classes. Short-term plans should focus on specific curriculum objectives to be attained and relevant methodologies to be employed. It is also recommended that monthly progress records specify the curriculum objectives that have been successfully realised.
• Teachers in special educational needs settings are advised to establish more specific, measurable and time-bound targets for their pupils. A closer link should also be established between recommendations in specialist reports and established targets. It is further advised that copies of monthly progress records be provided to relevant class teachers and that copies of individual educational programmes be provided to parents of pupils with low incident special educational needs.

• The school has a specific DEIS plan in place. However in future planning for DEIS initiatives the school is advised to garner and utilise school-based data to inform the planning process. Targets should also be more specific and measurable.

• 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

• Overall teachers manage classroom routines capably and confidently and have well-developed teaching skills. In order to cater more effectively for the varying learning needs of pupils, group work should be utilised in all mainstream classes, particularly for English and Mathematics.

• Cé go léiríonn na daltaí tuiscint áirithe ar an nGaeilge nil sé ar chumas a bhformhór cumarsáid a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge nó í a úsáid cuma is cumarsáide na ndaltaí. Is de réir an ríocht córas a bhí an nGaeilge mar ghnáth theanga bheo. Is de réir an ríocht a bhí in ann a bhí a leagan a leanadh ar chuid cumarsáide na ndaltaí. Is dhuine níos fearr a bhí ar a dtuiscint a úsáid cumhachtach a bhí a léiriú i mbraon stáitse. Is dhuine níos fearr a bhí ar a dtuiscint a úsáid cumhachtach a bhí a léiriú i mbraon stáitse.

• While pupils display some understanding of Irish, the majority of them are not able to communicate in Irish or use it as a living language. It is essential, therefore, that the development of pupils’ communicative abilities be emphasised at whole-school level. It is particularly recommended that teachers present lessons, based on the communicative approach, that teach vocabulary and language structures and that enable pupils to use the language naturally.

• A number of whole-school initiatives are implemented in English that lead to very beneficial learning outcomes. Schemes such as Literacy Lift Off and a structured approach to writing utilise effective methodologies and enhance pupils’ competencies in reading and writing. The school is now advised to implement a whole-school approach to oral language development. This should ensure that discrete time is allocated to this area in each class and that pupils are exposed to focused lessons targeted at improving their oral competencies.

• Teaching in Mathematics is characterised by clear explanations, good questioning and appropriate activities in line with curriculum objectives. Lessons would be enhanced if greater opportunities for hands-on experience and practical exploration were provided to pupils. It is also recommended that the school increase the range of mathematical equipment available in mainstream classes.
• Good quality lessons in Science were observed during the evaluation. These involved clear presentation of scientific ideas and opportunities for pupils to develop skills such as observing, questioning, prediction and investigation. The school has also undertaken high quality work in the strand Environmental awareness and care. There is a need, however, to ensure breadth and balance in the delivery of the science curriculum and to ensure that all pupils are familiar with key scientific concepts such as a fair test and controlling variables. More frequent opportunities to engage in design and make activities and greater attention to the subject-specific language of Science are also recommended.

• A whole-school approach to standardised assessment is in place. In order to derive maximum benefit from the data yielded by these assessments, individual pupil attainments in literacy and numeracy should be tracked year on year and benchmarked against performance in a non-reading intelligence test. Data garnered through assessment should also be used to inform differentiation at mainstream class level.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

• Overall the quality of teaching in special educational needs settings is good. Lessons are clear and well structured. There is a need, however, to ensure that programmes are based on pupils’ specific needs as opposed to generic classroom work.

• Some very effective strategies were observed in special educational needs settings during the course of the evaluation. Well structured interventions in neuro-developmental therapy, literacy and numeracy are used efficiently to support pupils’ learning.

• Currently most provision for pupils with special educational needs is provided on a withdrawal basis. The school is advised to develop structured in-class supports and team teaching strategies to reduce the need to withdraw pupils.

• There is significant scope for development in the quality of record keeping for pupils with special educational needs. It is advised that the school reviews its practice in this regard with a view to maintaining useful and accessible documentation on all pupils in receipt of support.

• Successful initiatives are undertaken to improve parental involvement in the school and to encourage school attendance and retention.

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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

On behalf of the whole school community, the Board of Management would like to thank the inspectorate for their very positive report on our school which we consider to be both fair and balanced and would like to acknowledge the courteous and professional approach taken by the inspectorate during their week-long visit to our school.

We are pleased that the report acknowledges the dedication and commitment of our B.O.M, principal and staff to our students at St. Brendan’s PS. Although the report mentions that we are included in the DEIS programme and that successful initiatives have been undertaken to improve parental involvement, school attendance and retention in school, we would like to take this opportunity to mention by name both our Home-school Community Liaison scheme and our School Completion Programme staff who work tirelessly to implement these initiatives.

We also feel that certain contextual factors should be mentioned when considering the report as a whole. In the two months before inspection the school had gone through major staffing changes with the retirement of previous Principal and appointment of current Principal along with five new teachers taking up posts in the school. In this time of transition at St. Brendan’s, the BOM, Principal and staff welcome the whole school evaluation as an opportunity to affirm what is great about our school and improve on our current practice to allow each of our students achieve to their full potential.

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

The Board of Management, Principal and Staff at St. Brendan’s PS welcome the advice and recommendations outlined in this report. It is very constructive to have and impartial evaluation of current practice to identify areas for improvement and adaptation. The following are actions already undertaken or planned since our evaluation:

- At Board level an agreed report has been introduced successfully and its contents are now communicated to our school community.
- Our extra hours from Croke Park agreement have been used productively to fully update and modify our record keeping procedures.
- Planning for a Student Council has gone ahead and this will be established in the coming year to afford students a say in general school affairs and give our students an increased sense of ownership and partnership in our school.
- The area of assessment and tracking of individual pupil attainments has been addressed and this will be used to inform differentiation at class level.
- We have visited other schools in our area to view adaptation of literacy initiatives and group work at mainstream level which are successfully implemented in our school but will come under increasing pressure due to staffing cutbacks.

The above actions successfully undertaken were prioritised by our school in our local review and the Board of Management working alongside the Principal and staff will endeavour to implement the remaining recommendations as part of our ongoing school development planning.