Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Dromore National School
Caheragh, County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 13095L

Date of inspection: 12 October 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Dromore NS was undertaken in October 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in Gaeilge, English, Mathematics and Social, Personal and Health Education. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Dromore NS is one of three schools in the parish of Caheragh in West Cork. It is a co-educational, rural, three-teacher parish school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. School statistics indicate a consistent enrolment pattern in recent years. Pupil attendance levels are high. The school adopts effective approaches with regard to attendance which conform with National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and Departmental guidelines and best practice.

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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>58</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>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The mission statement of Dromore NS states that the school strives to provide a harmonious, secure, welcoming environment where all experience kindness, understanding, happiness and respect. The practices and daily routines of the school are in harmony with these ideals and the school is a safe secure and attractive environment for teaching and learning.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management of Dromore NS is properly constituted and discharges its duties and responsibilities in an effective manner. Meetings are held regularly, minutes are recorded and the board oversees the financial affairs of the school. In that context it is recommended that the board of management make arrangements to have the school accounts certified annually in line with departmental advice and best practice.
The school building was completed in 1971 to replace existing facilities which dated back to the late 19th century. It is a four-classroom building with adequate recreational space and a number of additional internal spaces which currently serve as an office and kitchen. The school’s fifty-eight pupils are comfortably accommodated in the building. The school building is in excellent condition due to the diligence and strategic planning of successive boards of management. For example, windows and doors throughout the school have been replaced recently under the Department’s Summer Works Scheme. The school grounds are also well maintained and provide a safe, attractive environment for play and learning. All classrooms are well equipped with a broad range of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning across the curriculum.

The school complies with departmental regulations regarding 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

Since her appointment in 2006 the principal of Dromore NS has embraced her role with enthusiasm and commitment. Relationships with the board, parents, and the wider school community are positive and respect and mutual support are very evident. The principal combines her teaching and administrative roles effectively and ensures that the educational needs of the pupils are central to decision making in the school.

The in-school management team consists of the principal, deputy principal and an additional special duties post. The duties of post-holders are defined clearly, subject to review and encompass an appropriate mix of administrative, curricular and pastoral tasks. All post-holders perform these tasks conscientiously and the results of the work of the in-school management team are effectively disseminated through staff meetings, school planning documentation and particularly, through the daily informal exchanges between all members of the staff.

The developing team focus is a testament to the commitment and professionalism of the whole staff and there is a strong tradition of volunteerism in the school community.

1.4 Management of resources

School personnel and material resources are deployed effectively in Dromore NS. The teaching staff comprises the principal, two classroom teachers and one teacher in a support capacity. One special needs assistant, a part-time caretaker, a part-time secretary and a part-time cleaner are also employed by the board. All perform their duties to a high standard and make a significant contribution to the maintenance of a safe, clean and well-ordered learning environment.

The teaching staff are committed to their own continuing professional development and they have participated in a variety of courses made available through the local Education Centre. Courses attended have included Practical Strategies for Teaching Maths, Educating Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Education, First Aid, Drama in the Classroom, Art in the Classroom, Gaeilge Labhartha, ICT and Tús Maith. The school has also benefited from the expertise and advice of the professional development service for primary schools and the Special Education Support Service (SESS). It is advised that the school’s continuous professional development plan be formalised to ensure harmony with agreed teaching and learning objectives at a whole-school level and to avoid unnecessary duplication. Developing school policy with regard to staff rotation
was noted at the time of the whole-school evaluation and this will, in due course, provide appropriate opportunities for individual teachers to experience teaching at a variety of class levels.

The collaborative approach to teaching and learning, the emerging team dynamic and the enthusiasm, commitment and dedication of all members of the teaching staff are positive features of the work of the school. The school should consider ways of integrating team teaching and sharing expertise across the classes so that individual teachers can have the opportunity to experience the broad range of learning contexts on a regular basis.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The school strives to promote good communication and build trust and respect between parents and teachers. Home-school links are forged through parent-teacher meetings, school concerts, religious ceremonies, sporting activities and informal meetings between teachers and parents. The traditions and practices of the school are a positive reflection of the interests of the wider school community and provide many opportunities for positive interaction and engagement. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually to provide an opportunity for parents to discuss their children’s progress. Written reports on pupils’ progress are provided to parents at the end of each school year.

The board and the parents’ representatives expressed their positive support for the school and its teachers and were satisfied with the quality of educational provision and with general standards of pupil achievement. All partners recognised the value of good relationships in the community as a key cornerstone of learning.

1.6 Management of pupils

The board, parents and staff of Dromore NS are committed to the pastoral care and general welfare of all pupils. The board and the teaching staff have devised a code of behaviour and anti-bullying policies that are implemented consistently in the school. There are high expectations regarding appropriate pupil behaviour. Pupils understand and co-operate with school rules and display a sense of pride in their school community. Pupil behaviour is excellent and this contributes to effective learning in classrooms. The pupils are also confident and appear to have a positive sense of self-esteem. Teachers contribute positively to the maintenance of a healthy learning environment by using appropriate methodologies, setting realistic learning objectives and consistently praising effort as well as achievement.

2. Quality of school planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The principal and staff have collaborated effectively with the board in the development of appropriate administrative and curricular plans. When ratified by the board, these plans have been made available to the school community for viewing and comment. All curricular and organisational plans reflect the unique circumstances of the school and are presented in an accessible format. They are a useful guide to individual teacher planning and enhance educational provision in the school by providing guidance on the provision of high quality learning
experiences. It is recommended that the school develop a more collaborative role for parents in the formulation of relevant policies through the facilitation, by the board, of a formal parents’ association.

Classroom planning is informed by whole-school planning and was a consistent factor in the management of the learning across the curriculum in the learning contexts evaluated. The teaching staff prepare long-term and short-term plans and record learning achievements in a monthly progress record. In the classroom activity observed the teaching was focused on outcomes and incorporated suitable learning tasks. The approaches observed were consistent with the aims and objectives of whole school and classroom planning and the Primary School 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 Gaeilge

Sonraítear caighdeán ard i dteagasc na Gaeilge sa scóil agus tá moladh tuillte ag an bhfoireann as ardchaighdeán na hoibre ó thaobh labhairt agus scriobh na teanga de. Léirítear na ceachtanna go bríomhar agus cuirtear béim inmholta ar an labhairt. Mealltar na daltaí chun cainte go héifeachtach agus bhí atmaisféar fabhrach don teanga le sonrú ar fud na scoile le linn an mheasúnaithe seo. Baintear úsáid fhúinteach as an ndrámaíocht agus as an gceol agus an fhilíocht chun an obair a shaibhriú agus chun suim sa teanga agus sa chultúir Gaeilch a chothú. Cothaítear an léitheoireacht go cúramach agus léann an daltaí le brí agus le crúinneas. Bhí caighdeán inmholta le sonrú sna cleachtaí scribhneoireachta. Chun an caighdeán a ardú a thuilleadh amach anseo moltar don fhoireann ceachtanna oiriúnacha sna hábhair éagsúla a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge chun an chumarsáid a chur cinn ar bhealach cíneadh aidhmíúil.

Irish

A high standard of instruction in Irish was noted in the school and the teaching staff deserves praise for the high general standard achieved, especially in respect of the oral and written language. Lessons are presented in a lively, purposeful fashion and communication is emphasised. Pupils are effectively encouraged to engage in conversation and a favourable atmosphere for Irish was evident in the school at the time of the whole-school evaluation. Drama, music and poetry are used to good effect to enrich the work and to create an interest in the language and in Irish culture. Reading is cultivated carefully and pupils read with understanding and accuracy. A high standard was achieved in written work. In order to raise the standard
It is recommended that the teaching staff consider teaching appropriate lessons in the various other subjects through Irish in order to purposefully promote Irish as a means of communication.

3.2 English

Dromore NS places an appropriate emphasis on the development of reading skills and teachers recognise the fundamental importance of literacy skills as a cornerstone for learning. Oral development is prioritised in the junior classes and communication skills are developed consistently across all classes. Language development is emphasised and the communicative approach to learning is an important aspect of the work of the school.

The school provides a print-rich and stimulating environment for learning and a broad range of reading material is available to pupils in all classrooms. Writing skills and handwriting are given appropriate attention in the school. Much effort is expended to ensure that pupils acquire a fluent cursive style and written work is presented neatly. Pre-writing skills, proper pencil grip and correct letter formation are central to this work. Pupils write in a variety of genres and appropriate attention is paid to the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Standardised test results (Micra-T and Drumcondra tests) presented for analysis during the course of the whole-school evaluation indicated very good levels of achievement in reading.

3.3 Mathematics

The quality of mathematics teaching observed during the course of the whole-school evaluation was good and the pupils demonstrated very good levels of understanding with regard to basic concepts and adequate mastery of the observed strands and strand units of the mathematics curriculum. Active learning methodologies, investigation and estimation were employed to good effect and there was an appropriate emphasis on task completion. Appropriate equipment and materials were used in all classes and teachers made good efforts to promote the practical, environmental aspect of mathematics education. Mathematics games were emphasised in the lower classes and activities such as matching, classifying, comparing, ordering, and recognition of numbers and shapes were a critical aspect of this work. Pupils’ skills of reasoning, estimating, predicting, calculating and problem-solving are extended developmentally in the middle and senior classes. This work was developed incrementally throughout the classes and pupils generally displayed an appropriate understanding of mathematical concepts and a broad range of mathematical skills.

Support for pupils experiencing difficulty was provided through differentiated work and through an appropriate range of time-bound interventions by the support teacher. Results of standardised testing (Sigma-T tests) indicate achievement in mathematics commensurate with age throughout the school.

3.3 Social Personal and Health Education

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is taught effectively in Dromore NS. It is a designated, health-promoting school and has achieved green flag status as a result of the efforts of the pupils in recycling and waste management. The school has also achieved an award of
excellence for successfully participating in the Discover Primary Science Project in the 2007/08 school year. In addition, pupils are encouraged to partake in a broad range of extra-curricular activities such as community events, religious ceremonies, sporting, artistic and cultural events which reflect the interests of the broader school community.

Within the school grounds a positive school climate is nurtured and pupils are conscientiously guided in developing respectful attitudes towards other people. Visitors are greeted with respect and courtesy. SPHE lessons are developed from a broad range of resources and teachers draw on a range of programmes specially designed to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes which promote decision-making in the social, personal and health dimensions of pupils’ lives. These include the Walk Tall, Stay Safe and the Alive-O programmes. Consistent praise, positive recognition of suitable achievements and delegation of responsibilities further nurture the pupils’ self-esteem and confidence. Lessons are enlivened by meaningful discussion, story, poetry and games. Circle time is used as an appropriate methodology and excellent questioning techniques were observed in the context of SPHE education in the school. Parents co-operate with the staff in seeking to implement the school’s healthy eating and anti-bullying policies which support this area of curricular provision.

3.4 Assessment

The importance of assessment is recognised in whole-school planning documentation and a range of assessment modes is used to guide learning in the school. Teacher observation, frequent dialogue, collaborative planning, diagnostic testing and the appropriate use of standardised test data were observed to be effective aspects of assessment practice. Pupils’ work is carefully monitored and marked and assessment information is collated and discussed by teachers. Relevant information is relayed to parents at parent-teacher meetings and in the annual report on each child’s progress which is furnished to parents at the end of the school year.

The Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST) is administered to all pupils in their fifth school term and results are carefully analysed. When screening practices identify pupils in need, further diagnostic testing is carried out by the support teacher using a range of available tests such as the Belfield Infant Assessment Profile and the Neale Analysis Test. In the context of the school’s developing expertise in the use of a broad range of assessment tools it is suggested that staff consider ways of further developing the school’s practice in screening and diagnostic testing.

Standardised tests in use in the school on an annual basis are Micra-T and Sigma-T. The results of these tests are carefully monitored and enable teachers to reflect on their pupils’ progress and to consider differentiating the curriculum to meet the particular needs of individual pupils.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Pupils with special educational needs are ably assisted by a full-time support teacher. Children are selected for support teaching in accordance with the staged approach advised in the Learning Support Guidelines. Individualised plans are drawn up following analysis of assessment outcomes. These plans indicate pupils’ learning strengths and identify priority learning needs.
Pupils receiving support under the low incidence category of provision are well provided for. This critical work is influenced by well-constructed individual education plans which seek to build incrementally on identified strengths and also celebrate success. Parents are invited to meet with the support teacher when these plans are formulated and class teachers retain copies. A range of appropriate strategies are effectively used in support of pupils with special educational needs. These include withdrawal individually or in groups, in-class support or whole-class teaching. Records of progress are purposefully shared with parents and stored centrally to facilitate their accessibility and regular use.

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 a vibrant rural community with a strong sense of history and tradition.
- The board of management provides effective leadership to the school community and positive relationships exist between all relevant partners and stakeholders.
- The school has a committed and professional teaching staff, with a broad range of complementary skills and experiences, who contribute positively to the observed high levels of pupil achievement.
- The newly appointed school principal is committed to her work and articulates a positive vision for the school community whilst taking important initial steps in shaping the school’s direction and values and in nurturing a culture of success.
- The school is a suitable centre for learning within a community that respects teaching as a profession and recognises the work of parents and teachers as fundamental to meeting the needs of learners.

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 multi-class context in order that all teachers, including part-time teachers, might be afforded the opportunity to teach in a wider range of individual class contexts.
- It is recommended that current assessment practices be extended to include a broader range of screening and diagnostic assessment tools.
- It is recommended that the board of management facilitate the development of a formal parents’ association in order to further enhance good relationships within the school community and further promote the involvement of parents in the work of the school.
- It is recommended that the board of management arrange to have school accounts certified annually in line with departmental advice and best practice.
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.
Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

The Board wishes to thank the inspector for his courtesy and professionalism and have noted his recommendations.