An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Darrara National School
Cruary, Clonakilty, County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 13125R

Date of inspection: 19 October 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Darrara 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

Darrara NS is one of six schools in the parish of Clonakilty in West Cork. It is a co-educational, rural, parish school with three mainstream classrooms under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. There has been a significant growth in enrolments in recent years. The school implements appropriate strategies to promote pupils’ attendance in accordance with National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and Departmental guidelines and attendance levels are consistently high. 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>75</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>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

Darrara NS seeks to create an educational environment where the child is encouraged to reach his or her full potential to enable him or her to live a full life as a child and later as an adult. The work of the school clearly reflects these ideals. It provides a safe, secure and attractive environment for teaching and learning in which every effort is made to meet the social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive needs of all pupils.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management of Darrara NS is properly constituted and members are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. Meetings are held regularly, minutes are recorded and appropriate records are maintained in respect of school finances. In this context it is recommended that the board make arrangements to have school accounts certified annually in line with departmental advice and best practice. Individual members bring a broad range of complementary skills and experiences which are used to good effect in support of the school community. Collectively, board members strive to build partnership and community and provide a very suitable learning environment.
environment for pupils. The board’s positive work is evident in the substantial investment in teaching and learning resources and in the excellent condition of the school grounds and the building. The school building, which replaced an older structure dating back to the late 19th century, was completed on a new site, in 1984. It is a three classroom building, with an additional general purpose room, on a generous site with a variety of attractive and well-maintained recreational spaces. Currently, the general purpose room is used by the support teacher for individual, group or whole-class teaching on a withdrawal basis and by a number of visiting external tutors for speech and drama, art and music. One additional internal space has been adapted for use as a shared office for the principal and the school secretary. At the time of the evaluation a major refurbishment of the electrical and ICT infrastructure was underway supported by funding under the Department’s Summer Works Scheme.

The current board has engaged with the school planning process and is in the process of completing a broad range of curricular and administrative plans. The school complies 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

Since his appointment in 2007 the principal of Darrara NS has been an active agent for change and development. He has built partnership and trust and provided leadership and guidance to the whole school community. Relationships within the school are exemplary and a positive attitude towards developing the school prevails. He has been assisted in his work by all other teaching and non-teaching staff members and collegiality and an understanding of school leadership as a shared responsibility were evident in the daily practices of the school community. At the time of the evaluation the principal was due to take up a position in another school within a short time. The success he has achieved in leading and managing the school community since 2007 is recognised throughout the community.

There is a significant emphasis on team building and collegiality and a formal in-school management team exists in line with Departmental guidelines and best practice. It consists of the principal, deputy principal and an additional special duties post. The duties of post-holders are subject to review, change in line with evolving school needs and include 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 throughout the school community through formal and informal channels. It is advised that these good practices be refined by putting formal reporting structures in place with regard to the work of all post-holders.

1.4 Management of resources

Resources, both personnel and material, are deployed effectively in Darrara NS. The teaching staff comprise the principal, two classroom teachers and one teacher in a support capacity. Two special needs assistant, a part-time caretaker, a gardener, 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 board of management and the parents’ association members expressed satisfaction with the performance of all staff members and, in particular, with the quality of educational provision and with the general levels of pupil achievement.
The school is well equipped with a variety of suitable and age-appropriate resources in support of teaching and learning. All classrooms have newly installed interactive whiteboards which are used effectively as a teaching resource, when appropriate. Soundfield systems have been installed in all classrooms and 14 new computers have been purchased as part of the refurbishment project, currently underway. An outdoor Playmaze has been installed in the school playground which reflects the school’s emphasis on the key role of play in education. In addition, each classroom has a range of judiciously chosen books, resources and equipment which facilitates the use of practical tasks and active learning methodologies as a key aspect of learning.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The quality of relationships at all levels within the school community is exemplary. A sense of community is very evident and the school remains a key focal point in the area. Home-school links are fostered through parent-teacher meetings, school concerts, religious ceremonies, sporting activities and informal meetings between teachers and parents. The practices of the school are a positive reflection of the interest and expectations of the local community and lend themselves to positive interactions with all partners and stakeholders. Parents are encouraged to play an active part in the education of their children and their contributions are welcomed and appreciated. Information is shared and an open-door policy exists with regard to parental involvement. Formal parent-teacher meetings are held in line with departmental guidelines and best practice and written reports of pupil progress are issued annually. The outgoing principal has made a significant contribution to the high levels of morale and trust which are evident throughout the school community.

1.6 Management of pupils

The board, parents and staff of Darrara NS are committed to the pastoral care and general welfare of all pupils. Practices within the school are guided by agreed policy and a high premium is placed on appropriate behaviour. Pupils co-operate with school rules and display a sense of pride in their school community. Positive teacher-pupil relationships contribute to effective learning. Observed lessons had clear and achievable objectives and were presented using age-appropriate methodologies.

2. Quality of school planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The current board of management has re-engaged with the whole-school planning process and all school documentation has been subject to review since the appointment of the outgoing principal. The principal and staff have worked effectively in the ongoing review of school administrative and curricular documentation. All completed curricular and organisational plans reflect the unique circumstances of the school and are presented in an accessible format. It is advised that the reviews of plans and policies be completed within the time-frame of the current board.

The teaching staff prepare long-term and short-term plans and record learning achievements in a monthly progress record. A range of different planning practices were evident but, nonetheless, all classroom activity observed was outcomes focused with a suitable task orientation. The work
was also consistent with the aims and objectives of whole school and classroom planning and the Primary School Curriculum. It is suggested that agreed long-term and short-term planning templates be developed which would refine, at class level, 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 Gaeilge

Sonraithe atmaisfear fábrach don Ghaeilge sa scoil. Moltar iarraítaí na n-oidí chun suim na ndaltaí a Ghaeilge a chothú trí cheachtanna a chur in láthair go bríomhar, spreagúil. Cuirtear béim ar théamaí a bhaineann le timpeallacht agus le taithí na ndaltaí agus baintearúsáid as sraith táecsleabhar chun an fhoghluaimh a dhaingniú. Sonraithe caighdeán oiriúnaí ina gcuid oibre agus léiríonn síd tuiscint oiriúnaí ar Ghaeilge bunúsach sna ranganna uile.

Forbraítear cumas cainte na ndaltaí go hoiriúnaí le linn na gceachtanna agus baintearúsáid éifeachtaí as ábhar léirithe chun a dтуiscint ar fhoclóir naa bhunú. Cleachtar gníomhaiochtaí cainte agus obair i bpéire chomh maith agus úsáidtear iad go héifeachtach chun an t-íonchur nua teanga a chur i bhfeidhm. Baintearúsáid thairbhbeach as luaschártaí chun stór focal cuí a aithint sna bunranganna. Léann formhór na ndaltaí go cruinn agus cuirtear béim chuí a tharboraithe na mbunscolleanna scribhneoireachta trasna na scoile. Sonraithe ard-chaighdeán sa saothar scribhneoireachta a scrúdaíodh sna hard ranganna, ach go háirithe.

Irish

A favourable attitude to Irish was evident in the school. The efforts of the teaching staff to stimulate pupils’ interest in the language through presenting lively and stimulating classes were commendable. Learning content is based on themes that relate to pupil experiences and their environment and a range of texts are used to consolidate learning. An appropriate standard of achievement was evident from pupils’ work and from their understanding of basic Irish in all classes.

The spoken competency of pupils is developed appropriately during classes and visual resources are used effectively to support pupils’ understanding of new vocabulary. Pair-work and communication activities are also practiced and used effectively to reinforce the new language input. Effective use is made of flashcards to develop pupils’ sight vocabulary in the lower classes.
The majority of pupils read competently and basic writing skills are promoted throughout the school. A high standard of writing competence was noticeable in the samples evaluated in the senior classes, in particular.

3.2 English

English is taught effectively in Darrara NS. Lessons are stimulating and lively and presented in print-rich classroom environments. Oral development is emphasised in all classes and pupils are articulate and confident. Teachers display good communication skills and encourage pupils to express their thoughts and feelings using a wide variety of strategies. The acquisition of vocabulary and the development of oral language skills is appropriately integrated with other curricular areas and language development occurs across the curriculum. All classes have regular experiences of rhyme, poetry and song. The development of phonological awareness, the blending of sounds and word attack skills are developed in the junior classes and reinforced in age appropriate ways as pupils progress through the school.

The development of reading skills is emphasised and pupils are encouraged to read using a variety of methods. A range of suitable reading material is available in all classes and good practice is modelled by teachers. Shared reading is promoted and parental involvement is encouraged. A substantial investment in new reading schemes and in library books was made in September 2009 in order to maintain appropriate and interesting reading material in all classes. Pupils’ skills of reasoning, estimating, predicting, calculating and problem-solving are extended developmentally in middle and senior classes using active methodologies and relevant resources.

Standardised test scores indicate appropriate levels of literacy achievement in the general school population with appropriate support measures in place for those experiencing difficulty.

3.3 Mathematics

The quality of mathematics teaching observed during the course of the whole-school evaluation was high and the pupils demonstrated appropriate levels of understanding with regard to basic concepts. Maths games are emphasised in the lower classes where mathematical skills, such as matching, classifying, comparing, ordering, and recognition of numbers and shapes, are developed. Pupils’ skills of reasoning, estimating, predicting, calculating and problem-solving are extended developmentally in middle and senior classes using active methodologies and relevant resources.

Pupils generally display an appropriate competence in mathematics, use mathematical skills and concepts effectively, enjoy solving problems and are comfortable using the language of mathematics. Results of standardised testing (Sigma-T tests) indicate achievement in mathematics commensurate with age throughout the school. Support for pupils experiencing difficulty was provided by differentiated work and through an appropriate range of time bound interventions by the support teacher.

3.3 Social Personal and Health Education

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is taught effectively in Darrara NS. It is a designated health promoting school since 2008 and has engaged in a range of activities such as
food sampling from local suppliers, drug and alcohol abuse seminars, cookery demonstrations, healthy lunch workshops for parents, health checks and visits from Gardaí and medical professionals. The school has Green Flag status since 2007 and environmental care and protection is a notable feature of the work of the school community. For example, a gardening committee has been formed to create a vegetable and herb garden in support of the learning objectives of the Science curriculum. As a part of the school refurbishment project, currently underway, a number of cookers and ovens are being installed in the school with a view to organising cookery classes.

In line with community traditions pupils are also encouraged to participate in a range of extra curricular and co-curricular activities. Pupils engage in dance, art, gymnastics, outdoor pursuits, swimming, football, hurling, camogie, cycling and tag rugby classes, some of which involve external coaches, parents or local club activists working in collaboration with class teachers. The school is involved in bi-annual Christmas parish concerts and in nativity plays in the local Catholic church. It has also been involved in the local St. Patrick’s Day parade in Clonakilty. The school takes an active part in the relevant activities which are part of the annual Clonakilty Show which is a major community event in the area.

Formal SPHE classes are developed from a broad range of resources and teachers draw on a range of programmes specially designed to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes to support decision making in the social, personal and health dimensions of pupils’ lives. These include the Walk Tall, Stay Safe and the Alive-O programmes. Appropriate methodologies and a positive supportive atmosphere were notable features of observed classes and respect, courtesy and consideration for others were evident in the daily routines of the school.

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 pupil progress which is furnished at the end of the school year.

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 set out in the Learning Support Guidelines. Individualised plans are drawn up following analysis of results of testing. 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 guided by well-constructed individual education plans which seek to build incrementally on identified strengths and 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 pupils’ 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 board of management provides effective leadership to the school community, promotes partnership and provides a safe secure and attractive environment for teaching and learning.
- The positive nature of relationships within the school community facilitates growth and development and promotes sustainable change.
- The principal has provided dynamic leadership to the school community and has been a significant factor in the development of an agreed common vision for education and systems for the effective management of the school.
- Effective teaching occurs at all levels within the school and a shared understanding exists with regard to the purposes and processes of education.
- Levels of pupil achievement are satisfactory and there is an appropriate focus on standards.

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 complete the whole school planning process within the time-frame of the current board and develop a strategic plan with regard to regular review of policies thereafter.
- It is recommended that the teaching staff devise common templates for long term and short term planning with a view to further refining existing school practices in support of agreed whole school curricular and co-curricular objectives.
- It is recommended that the board of management 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.

Published, November 2010
Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

- The Board of Management welcomes the WSE report and would like to thank the inspector for his input and advice.
- The BOM acknowledge the continuing hard work of the teaching staff and the parents.
- The BOM welcomes the acknowledgement by the cigire of the high standards of education being achieved throughout the school. It is a true reflection of the dedication of staff. It highlights in a practical way the emphasis which is placed on the teaching and learning process.
- The school community; pupils, teachers and parents can be proud of the praise for the children and positive teacher – pupil relationships.
- We can be particularly proud of the acknowledgement of the wonderful relationship created and maintained within the school community encompassing all parents, and the wider local community.

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

A number of recommendations have been made by the cigire. The BOM is happy to relate that significant progress has been made in relation to these recommendations.