Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Mary’s Infant School
Dunmanway,
County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 13662U

Date of inspection: 12 October 2010
1. Introduction

St Mary’s Infant School is situated in the town of Dunmanway and accepts children up to first class only. It is a co-educational school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. Currently, there are 103 pupils enrolled in the school. School statistics indicate a consistent enrolment pattern in recent years. The school adopts effective approaches with regard to attendance which conform to National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and Departmental guidelines. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The board of management provides effective leadership and management to the school community, discharges its duties diligently and facilitates progress and school improvement.

- The school is a well-maintained, well-ordered educational facility in which a broad range of suitable teaching and learning resources are made available.

- The school is respected and supported by the local community and good relationships are evident between all members of the school community.

- The principal and staff work collaboratively and effectively to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum in line with Departmental guidelines and the learning needs of pupils.

- A suitable emphasis is placed on the achievement of high standards in both teaching and learning.

- Leadership is encouraged and facilitated at all levels within the school community and teamwork and collegiality are fostered and valued by all partners.

The following main recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that school policies continue to be reviewed and amended, where necessary, to ensure that they accurately reflect current school practices and procedures.

- It is recommended that the school devise a strategic short term action plan which identifies key areas for future educational development and possible infrastructural rationalisation and growth.

- It is recommended that the board develop a continuing professional development (CPD) plan to further improve the competencies of the staff in infant education and provide the necessary supports, where possible, to implement this programme.
3. Quality of School Management

• The board of management is properly constituted and manages the work of the school effectively and efficiently. Members are actively involved in school matters and seek to cultivate good relations within the school community. The board facilitates educational progress and development and, with resources made available by the Department and with local support, provides a safe, secure and well resourced educational facility.

• The physical environment of the school is well developed, free of hazards, clean and efficiently maintained. Recent renovations, using Departmental grant-aid and other voluntary contributions, have resulted in the provision of sufficient classroom space, other ancillary spaces and additional hard-surface playing areas. Some facilities, such as the school hall, are shared with the adjacent senior girls’ school and both work in a mutually supportive manner. This professional relationship facilitates the smooth transition of pupils between the respective schools and allows for positive dialogue on common future planning. The respective boards are to be commended for their initiative in optimising the potential of the existing site and for creating good quality learning and recreational spaces for pupils.

• The provision and effective use of resources is very good. All classrooms are well-equipped, attractively maintained and pupils are given adequate opportunity to engage in activity and discovery learning. Suitable reading material is made available and a love of reading is fostered. Investment in information and communication technology (ICT) is well advanced in the school and the effective use of interactive white boards was a positive feature of teaching and learning in the majority of lessons observed.

• In-school management practices are very good and leadership is distributed throughout the school. The principal is democratic and open and exerts a positive influence on the work of the school. She is assisted in her work by the deputy principal and two teachers with special duties posts. Respective duties are defined in line with Departmental guidelines and are carried out effectively. The in-school management team contributes positively to the effective organisation and management of the work of the school and to the effective dissemination of relevant information.

Advice was given at the time of the evaluation with regard to the submission of a brief annual report on their activities by all post-holders to the board and on the need to constantly review assigned duties in line with changing school needs. This practice would be further enhanced by a formal school policy which promotes the professional development of staff and builds internal capacity in identified areas.

• Ancillary staff employed by the board includes two special needs assistants (SNAs), a secretary and a care-taker. They perform their duties to a satisfactory standard and contribute to the efficient running of the school.

• The daily practices and routines of the school indicate satisfactory compliance with current legislation and with departmental regulations regarding the length of the school year, enrolment and retention of pupils, health and safety and the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum. Satisfactory clarification with regard to the length of the school day was obtained during the course of the evaluation.
• The board has facilitated the establishment of a parents’ association which is affiliated to the National Parents’ Council (NPC). It also effectively promotes contact with the general body of parents and with the wider school community. Parent information evenings are facilitated, parent-teacher meetings are held in line with Departmental guidelines, pupil-progress data are shared and written reports are given to parents at the end of the school year. In addition, parental response is sought in relation to aspects of whole-school planning, and parents are invited to be involved in the organisation of concerts, games and school tours and the celebration of community events. High levels of parental support for the school were evident from the data collected from the questionnaires completed by parents.

Given the commendable emphasis on literacy development as a key cornerstone of learning in the school the further involvement of parents in reading initiatives such as paired reading might be considered as a means towards future development.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

• Whole-school planning documents, including administrative and curricular policies, provide clear and useful guidelines for the work of the school. Good use has been made of the available support services personnel for whole-school planning and a process of review exists. Whole-school planning exerts an influence on individual teacher planning and promotes continuity and progression in teaching and learning throughout the school.

All teachers prepare long and short-term plans and maintain monthly progress records. Continuity and progression in learning is facilitated by good planning and is supported by regular dialogue between teachers and school management about learning outcomes.

• Some reflection on standards and self-evaluation occurs within the school. This is mainly based on teacher observation, and on anecdotal and documentary evidence. The analysis of standardised test results is primarily focused on the identification of pupils in need of additional supports. There is now scope for development with regard to the use of self-evaluation as an effective tool of school improvement. This might, initially, be achieved by a deeper analysis of standardised test data leading to additional outcomes-focused target setting in the key areas of literacy and numeracy.

• 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.

School management was advised with regard to the need to record the appointment of the school DLP and deputy DLP in the official minute of the board at the first meeting of each school year.
5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Lessons are, generally well planned and effectively delivered in the school. A wide variety of resources are at hand to facilitate discovery and there is no obvious over-dependence on textbooks. ICT is used effectively and exploration and discovery methods are used to good effect. In the course of the evaluation, parental representatives expressed high levels of satisfaction with the standards of teaching and with the general levels of pupil attainment in all areas of the curriculum. They were particularly satisfied with the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils and the manner in which they were allowed access to all relevant data regarding their children’s progress. This view was also reflected in the positive responses of the community as expressed through the questionnaires completed by parents.

- Sroichtear caighdeán ard i dteagasc agus i bhfoghlaíom na Gaeilge sa scoil. Úsáidtear modhanna múinte spreagúla agus is léir go bhfuil cumas na ndaltaí á fhorbairt go torthúil sna ranganna uile. Moltar, ach go háirithe, an úsáid a bhaintear as an gclár bán idirghníomhach agus na cleachtaí drámaíochta a spreagann na daltaí chun rannpháirtíochtacht. Moltar leanúnachas na hoibre i bhfeidhmíu an churachaím ó rang go rang agus an dea-chleachtas a bhi le sonrú sna ceachtanna éagsúla.

Chun an dea-chleachtas a fhorbairt a thuilleadh, moltar béim bhreise a chur ar úsáid na Gaeilge mar mheán cumarsáide nádúrtha.

A high standard in the teaching and learning of Irish is attained in the school. Positive methodologies are used and it is clear that the pupils’ fluency in Irish is being developed successfully in all classes. The use of the interactive whiteboard is particularly commendable as are the various drama activities which motivate pupils to participate in lessons. Continuity in the implementation of the curriculum from class to class and the good practice observed in the various lessons is to be commended.

To further develop existing good practice more emphasis on the use of Irish as a natural medium of communication might be considered.

- In relation to the teaching of English, there is appropriate and consistent emphasis on literacy development in the school. Effective strategies are used to develop the pupils’ oral language. Word recognition skills are emphasised and print rich environments stimulate pupil interest in the written word. Stories, rhymes and music are used to create mood and stimulate curiosity and investigation. ICT is used effectively in the development of literacy skills. Pre-writing skills are developed and a structured approach is adopted throughout the school.

Pupils are screened using the MIST test in the second term of senior infants and those experiencing difficulty are assisted by the learning support teacher in line with their individual needs. Pupils whose first language in not English are supported through targeted interventions by a part-time teacher of English as an additional language (EAL). The quality of collaboration between the teachers is very good and whole-school planning guidelines emphasise consistency in the mastery of key literacy skills. Whole school achievement in literacy might be further enhanced by the application of outcomes-focused targets with regard to literacy achievement within the various percentile bands or at the different class levels.
• Good practice occurs in the teaching of Mathematics. There is a consistent emphasis on the development of the language of Mathematics and on oral work generally. Observed lessons were activity based and concrete materials were used to effectively promote understanding of concepts. ICT is also used effectively in the teaching of Mathematics. However, the over-dependence on particular textbooks observed in some classes is discouraged. Ability grouping, early screening and the creation of pupil profiles should be used in the future to further enhance the quality of mathematics education in the school.

• Physical Education (PE) is taught effectively in the school. A broad and balanced programme is offered and recommended curriculum time is allocated. Good use is made of equipment and suitable indoor and outdoor facilities are available. All teaching staff are comfortable while teaching physical education and use these classes to reinforce key number concepts, colours and basic vocabulary in Irish and in English and to develop effective listening skills. Pupils display confidence and high levels of self-esteem and clearly derive enjoyment from the PE programme.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

• Support for pupils with special educational needs is provided for by two staff members. One is a full-time position and the other is shared with a school in a nearby parish. Additional supports for newcomer pupils are provided by a part-time teacher of English as an additional language. Two SNAs are assigned to the school.

A systematic policy of testing is employed and support is made available to individual pupils with specific needs through a combination of approaches which include individual, group and class withdrawal. Individual learning programmes with realistic targets are designed collaboratively. Progress is monitored and data is carefully stored and shared with class teachers, parents and guardians.

The professional manner in which the support for pupils with special educational needs is managed, and the manner in which resources are sourced and provided are positive features of the work of the school.

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