An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Joseph’s National School
Cong, County Mayo
Uimhir rolla: 13686L

Date of inspection: 22 October 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Joseph’s National School, Cong 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 English, Mathematics and History. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St Joseph’s National School is situated in the village of Cong, county Mayo. The present school was built in 1970 and extended in 2008. The extension has resulted in the creation of a very attractive teaching and learning environment. The school is very well maintained outside and inside. The outside areas of the school are commendably laid out for playground games and activities. The school has recently been awarded its fifth Green Flag. The school participates in a range of sporting events. A playing pitch is available to the rear of the school.

Almost all pupils come from Cong and the surrounding area. Enrolment figures have been increasing steadily over the last few years and it is expected that numbers will remain at least at current levels for the foreseeable future.

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>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision
The school is under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Tuam. It aims to foster a welcoming and positive atmosphere, in which the uniqueness of each child is respected. There is an understanding, as set out in the school’s mission statement, that each child’s personality and intelligence should be developed to their potential. Each member of staff is committed to implementing this vision.

1.2 Board of management
The board of management is constituted in accordance with Department of Education and Skills regulations. The board meets at least once a term, although fourteen meetings of the board have been held since December 2007. The frequency of these meetings was necessitated by the school extension. This commitment from board members is to be commended. Minutes are kept of the
proceedings of each meeting. The development, review and ratification of school policy documents also form part of each board meeting.

The chairperson of the board of management visits the school regularly. Members of the board of management have been allocated tasks to assist in the smooth running of the school. The treasurer gives a financial report at each board meeting. This work is to be commended, although there is a need to ensure that school accounts are certified or audited in future, in accordance with section 18 (1) of the Education Act, 1998. Some members of the board of management have attended training events organised by the Catholic Primary School Managers’ Association (CPSMA). It is intended that more members of the board will receive training for their role in the near future.

The board of management expressed its satisfaction with the work of the school staff and the achievement of the pupils. The recent purchase of interactive whiteboards for each classroom has led to an enhancement of the teaching and learning process. The board’s current priority is to continue to improve the facilities and services that the school offers.

1.3 In-school management
The principal, deputy principal, and one special-duties teacher form the in-school management team. The principal’s vision for the school is to provide a harmonious learning environment for all pupils. The principal is competent and diligent in carrying out his teaching and management duties. He demonstrates effective leadership skills and has overseen the successful development of the school since his appointment as principal in 1983. The principal acknowledges the close working relationship of the school staff and the support that he receives from the board of management.

The deputy principal and special-duties teacher provide very good support in the day-to-day management of the school. The contracts for these posts indicate the curricular, administrative and pastoral responsibilities of each post holder. These duties are reviewed regularly to ensure that current school needs are addressed.

Staff meetings are held once a term. Discussions at these meetings mostly cover organisational and curricular matters. Informal staff meetings are held regularly and decisions are usually reached by consensus.

The special-needs assistant and the cleaning staff make a valuable contribution to the running of the school.

1.4 Management of resources
School personnel are deployed effectively to ensure that strengths are utilised and opportunities are provided for professional development. The school is well stocked with an impressive range of resources for each curricular area. Each classroom is equipped with modern furniture and each classroom provides an attractive and stimulating learning environment.

Class libraries are well stocked with a commendable variety of fiction and non-fiction. Resources for Mathematics are also available in each classroom to enhance the teaching and learning process. The variety and quality of the resources for the teaching of History are impressive. Material for use in integrated visual arts and history projects, such as the construction of a model of Cong Abbey, is readily available. The school has assembled much documentary evidence on local famous people and famous events. This documentation has been put to good use in the creation of commendable written projects, with illustrations gathered from a variety of sources.
Digital cameras and camcorders are used very effectively to record interesting history field trips. Pupils in the senior classes demonstrate considerable ICT skills in photographing, filming, editing and presenting this highly commendable work.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
While there is no parents’ association in the school, it was stated at the meeting with the parents’ representatives on the board of management, held as part of this evaluation, that parents were satisfied with the present situation.

It was reported that parents have regular communication with the principal. Letters and notes are sent from the school to parents on a frequent basis. Parents are thus kept well-informed of important school matters.

Among the school activities in which parents are involved are the provision of dancing and piano lessons for pupils before and after school hours. Parents also work with the teachers in the implementation of a parallel-reading programme in the school. Parents’ skills are well utilised by the school, for example in the development of the school garden, the teaching of GAA skills, and the implementation of a walk-to-school programme.

Parents’ views are sought on all school policies. A clear procedure is followed whereby a written request is sent to all parents inviting submissions on a particular policy area. Parents are also welcome to comment on draft policies prior to their ratification.

The parents’ representatives expressed their satisfaction with the education provided in the school. They felt that there was a good balance in the school in the teaching of the various curricular areas. Parents welcomed the strong emphasis on the history of Cong and the surrounding area. Parents have accompanied teachers and pupils on many of the history walks regularly organised at each class level. There was no curricular area where the parents’ representatives felt that improvement was needed.

When parents have concerns about school matters, or where problems have arisen, these are dealt with effectively by the staff. The teachers in the school are approachable and always available to discuss parents’ concerns. A formal parent-teacher meeting is held each year, where parents are given an oral account of their children’s progress. A written report on their children’s progress is sent to parents at the end of the school year.

1.6 Management of pupils
The behaviour of the pupils is commendable. The pupils are respectful of their teachers and of visitors to the school. They are well motivated and are keen to participate in lessons, activities and project work. The co-operation among pupils that is evident in group activities is creditable. The group work and projects completed in History are particularly praiseworthy. Pupils at each class level are enthusiastic and confident in answering questions and in discussing their work. The pupils are appropriately supervised in the classroom and in the school yard.

2. Quality of school planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The quality of whole-school planning is very good. A collaborative approach to planning has been adopted, whereby the teachers, parents and board of management work effectively together to produce worthwhile and commendable school policies. The school plan is clearly and neatly
laid out in folders. Policies have been developed for all curricular areas and for an appropriate range of organisational and administrative policies. Each policy has been formally ratified by the board of management. An appropriate schedule for implementation and review is in place to ensure that each policy reflects the current needs of the school.

The school plan for History is of a very high standard. The school has availed of assistance from the national support services in developing a clearly presented and comprehensive history plan. The plan is in line with curriculum design and shows how the strand units are allocated to each class on a two-yearly basis, identifying topics to be covered and approaches to be taken. It also shows how certain topics are selected from the menu curriculum and identifies areas for in-depth study in the middle and senior classes. The plan places due emphasis on the development of pupils’ skills as historians. The study of local history is emphasised at each class level. An inventory of resources has been put together to support the implementation of the history curriculum. In particular, local people who can contribute to enhancing the teaching and learning of History are identified in the plan. To further enhance the planning process for History, it is recommended that more detailed information on assessment, recording and reporting procedures be included in the school plan in future.

The quality of classroom planning is very good overall. The planning and preparation undertaken by some teachers is of a particularly high standard. All teachers provide long-term and short-term schemes of work and a monthly record of the work covered and of the progress of each pupil. There is a need to ensure greater consistency in planning in some areas. Timetables in all classes are set out in accordance with the Department’s recommended minimum weekly time framework. It is recommended, however, that more detailed information on assessment be included in some teachers’ planning documentation.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Science Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 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 English

The school plan for English is based on the structure and principles of the curriculum. The importance of developing pupils’ oral, reading and writing skills is appropriately emphasised in the plan. The school’s oral-language programme is implemented effectively and pupils’ listening and speaking skills at each class level are very good. Word games, discussions and debates form a commendable part of pupils’ oral-language development throughout the school. A wide range of rhymes, songs and jingles is used effectively in the junior classes. An appropriate range of poetry has been studied at most class levels. Pupils in these classes can recite poems with confidence and expression.

The quality of the teaching and learning of English reading in the school is very good. Creditable emphasis is placed on developing pupils’ phonological awareness in the junior classes. Pre-reading lessons are well structured with effective use being made of a variety of resources, such
as flashcards and big books, to encourage an interest in reading. Reading lessons in the middle and senior classes are also well structured and most pupils demonstrate a keen interest in reading and children’s literature in these classes. Commendable print-rich environments have been developed in most classrooms. Class libraries are used effectively to maintain good reading standards by encouraging pupils to read independently and for pleasure. Lessons and activities are differentiated to cater for the two class groups in each classroom. Group work and paired activities are effectively used in most classrooms to enhance the teaching and learning process. Pupils demonstrate good comprehension of what they have read and they are articulate in responding to questions based on their reading.

A clear and structured approach to developing pupils’ pre-writing skills is evident in the junior classes. At this early stage the groundwork is laid for the neatness of presentation of pupils’ written work that is to be seen throughout the school. The drafting, editing and re-drafting of written work is undertaken systematically in the middle and senior classes. There are many creditable samples of pupils’ completed written work on display at each class level. ICT is used to enhance the writing process in the senior classes and pupils in these classes demonstrate good word-processing skills.

Teacher-designed tests are administered and checklists are maintained to record pupils’ progress in English reading and writing in most classrooms. There is a need, however, to place more emphasis on the monitoring and correcting of written work in some classes.

3.2 Mathematics
There are many positive aspects to the teaching of Mathematics in this school. Most pupils demonstrate a good knowledge of the work covered across the various strands of the Mathematics curriculum. A wide range of mathematical resources is available in every classroom. These resources and concrete materials are used throughout the school to enhance the teaching and learning process. A Mathematics-rich environment has been developed in most classrooms and Mathematics trails are well laid out in the school yard. It is recommended that a Mathematics-rich environment be further developed in some classrooms and in public areas of the school.

A practical approach to the teaching of Mathematics is adopted throughout the school. Each teacher is committed to implementing active and collaborative learning strategies in Mathematics. Most lessons are presented in a manner that motivates pupils and stimulates their interest in the topic being studied. Mathematics games are used effectively at each class level. The development of pupils’ vocabulary in Mathematics receives due attention. Pupils in the middle and senior classes demonstrate commendable mastery of number facts (tables). Pupils’ problem-solving skills are well developed in most classes and the pupils clearly enjoy the challenge of this work. Differentiation strategies are used effectively throughout the school to ensure that individual pupils’ learning needs are addressed.

3.3 History
There is a very high standard in the teaching and learning of History. The whole-school plan for History has significant strengths. Classroom planning for History is very good and is in accordance with the school plan. The effect of the school’s approach to planning for History is evident in the breadth and balance of the History programme implemented at each class level. Creditable emphasis is placed on achieving a balance between studying historical topics and developing pupils’ skill as historians. History is effectively integrated with other subjects, especially Geography, English and Visual Arts. Highly commendable projects have been completed on historical topics throughout the school.
History lessons are presented in a stimulating and interesting way in the junior classes. The strands *Myself and my family* and *Story* are very well covered. Pupils at this level demonstrate commendable ability in sequencing stories, which helps to develop their sense of chronology. Local studies are introduced in the infant classes with pupils being aware of Cong’s historical sites. The study of local history is carefully developed and expanded in the middle and senior classes. This results in most pupils leaving primary school with a strong sense of local identity and a very good knowledge of their local area.

History areas have been developed throughout the school, with attractive displays in each classroom. Timelines are displayed in all classrooms. These are used effectively to enhance the teaching and learning of History in most classrooms. It is recommended that more regular and effective use be made of timelines in some classrooms. The school is very well resourced for History. Books on historical topics, fiction and non-fiction, are on display in class libraries and a wide range of artefacts is on display throughout the school. Almost all pupils demonstrate good knowledge of the topics and eras they have studied. Appropriate local, national and international events are well covered at each class level.

### 3.4 Assessment

Useful assessment records are maintained at each class level. The quality of the assessment records maintained in some classes is very good. Pupils’ work is regularly monitored and corrected in most classes, although this work should receive more attention in some classes to provide more effective feedback to pupils. Teacher observation, checklists, work samples and project work are among the methods of assessment used in the school.

Standardised tests are administered to pupils once a year in English reading and Mathematics. Standardised test results are filed in the learning-support and resource classroom. The Belfield Infant Attainment Profile (BIAP) and the Middle-Infant Screening Test (MIST) are administered each year in the infant classes.

Teacher-designed tests are used regularly to assess pupils’ progress in a variety of curricular areas in some classes. The assessment of pupils’ progress in History is mainly based on the monitoring of pupils’ copybooks and the project work pupils have completed.

### 4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

#### 4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

The quality of support available for pupils with special educational needs in the school has many positive and praiseworthy aspects. The classroom used by the learning-support and resource teachers is attractively and neatly laid out, although there is scope to develop a more print-rich and Mathematics-rich environment. The school places due emphasis on early intervention once pupils have been identified as having learning difficulties.

Individual education plans (IEPs) are provided for each pupil who receives learning-support or resource teaching. Mainstream class teachers keep a copy of relevant IEPs in their files. Parents are aware of the content of their children’s IEPs. It is recommended that parents receive a copy of the plan for their child. The results of standardised tests are used to identify pupils who require learning support. A range of diagnostic tests is used to identify each pupil’s specific learning needs. It is recommended that pupils who transfer from other schools be assessed to identify possible learning needs as soon as possible. This important work should not be delayed until school-wide testing takes place.
4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

The school has an open enrolment policy and pupils from all backgrounds and all levels of ability are welcome to enrol. Pupils from many different countries have been enrolled in the school for a number of years. At present, there are four pupils in the school who are in receipt of support teaching in English as an Additional Language (EAL).

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The board of management is very supportive of the work of the school. The board is commended for ensuring that the school is well stocked with a wide variety of suitable teaching resources.
- The principal teacher is to be commended for his work in implementing his vision for the school and for his leadership of the school staff as a co-ordinated team.
- The teachers are competent and diligent in their work and they are committed to ensuring that pupils receive a broad and balanced education.
- The school building is very well maintained. Very good work has been done in developing an attractive and stimulating learning environment for pupils.
- The school plan is clearly laid out, with appropriate and carefully considered curricular plans and administrative policies.
- English reading is very well taught in the school. Pupils at each class level demonstrate commendable reading skills.
- Impressive work has been done in the implementation of the school’s Mathematics programme. Teaching methods are influenced by the active-learning emphasis of the Primary School Curriculum.
- The teaching of History is highly commendable. A broad and balanced programme is implemented at each class level.
- Effective use is made of ICT in teaching and learning across a range of curricular areas.
- Effective emphasis is placed on the development of pupils’ higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving skills across the school.

The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

- It is recommended that classroom planning be further co-ordinated to ensure a standard approach for all class groups.
- It is recommended that pupils transferring from other schools be assessed as soon as possible to identify potential learning-support needs.
- It is recommended that a Mathematics-rich environment be further developed in some classrooms and in public areas of the school.

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, September 2010