Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St. Matthias NS, Church Road,
Ballydehob, Co. Cork
Uimhir rolla: 13976U

Date of inspection: 5 December 2011
1. Introduction

St. Matthias NS is a mixed, rural school under the patronage of the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. Currently, there are nineteen pupils enrolled in the school. Enrolment trends have been varied over the last five years, ranging between fifty-one in September 2008, at which time the school achieved developing school status, and the current figure. Additional funding is provided in the school under the terms of the DEIS scheme which combats rural disadvantage in 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- There is a positive and inclusive working atmosphere in the school which is supportive of the individual needs of each pupil.
- The school has a committed and hard working staff.
- The school is well resourced.
- Effective teaching strategies are regularly used.
- Pupils are, generally, progressing in line with normal expectations and their standardised test scores are satisfactory.
- Within the constraints of the current site, the board ensures effective maintenance of suitable premises for teaching and learning.

The following main recommendations are made:

- In an effort to arrest declining enrolment trends, the board should promote an image of the school which displays the quality of the work being completed and celebrates the achievements and attainments of pupils and of the school community.
- School management and staff should prioritise the development of handwriting skills and the effective presentation of written work as essential aspects in the promotion of a positive image of the school.
- All pupils should complete the full eight year cycle of schooling. The practice of promoting pupils internally should be discontinued.
- The board should examine ways in which the older section of the school building might be made more functional as a learning environment whilst also incorporating other necessary administrative and circulation spaces.
3. Quality of School Management

- A new board of management has recently been established in the school. The board is properly constituted and individual members display a good awareness of the unique challenges facing the school and of the parameters within which school boards operate. A useful measure of continuity exists between the old and new board. This overlap in membership should bring an important perspective to the work of the board.

- In the course of the evaluation, board members indicated that they have confidence in the teaching staff, are satisfied with the general level of pupil attainment on completion of primary level schooling and are firmly of the belief that the school has a sustainable future. The new board has correctly identified declining enrolment trends as being a priority issue for them and plan to take corrective action. In this context, advice was given in relation to the need to further develop local channels of formal communication such as newsletters, a school website, a school notice board and, possibly, parental curricular information meetings.

- It is also important at this crucial time to place teaching and learning at the heart of board discussions and to embrace a culture of continuous self-evaluation. The promotion of an image of the school which displays the quality of the work being completed and celebrates the achievements of individuals or groups across the curriculum should also be a consideration for the new board.

- The previous board managed the financial affairs of the school responsibly and certified accounts for the previous school year which were presented for examination during the course of the WSE. Given that the board are in a healthy financial state, it is advised that the incoming board address the physical deficiencies of the site and further improve general working conditions of the teachers and of the pupils.

- A suitable range of teaching and learning resources has been provided and their effective use was a feature of many of the lessons observed. The provision of information and communication technology (ICT) hardware and software is at an advanced stage in the school and all staff members are proficient in the use of ICT as a teaching tool.

- Parental questionnaire responses indicated that all of the parents surveyed consider the school to be well run. Most parents are aware of the work the board undertakes on behalf of the school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- A comprehensive and useful range of school policies has been developed in relation to the curriculum, organisational matters and the pastoral needs of the pupils. These are, generally, well informed and take due account of the legal framework in which schools operate. The principal has played a key role in whole-school planning.

- The challenge for school management is to ensure that whole-school planning documents remain relevant and pertinent to evolving school circumstances through a regular review process. In this context, it is recommended that the in-coming board continues the process of re-evaluating policies with a view to reviewing all school policies within their four year term of office. A suitable starting point should be the school mission and ethos statements which may need to be re-evaluated in the light of the broad diversity in the current pupil population and fluctuating enrolment trends.
• All teaching staff members complete long-term and short-term plans in respect of all curricular areas and record progress on a monthly basis.

• School management is aware of the need to embrace internal school review processes which facilitates the critical evaluation of their work. It is recommended therefore that the staff and board reflect on current school aims, determine new criteria, where necessary, for the measurement of success, promote a school improvement agenda and develop channels of communication which facilitate regular, evidence based, feedback on progress.

• Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

• The school is a suitable place for learning in which a positive code of behaviour is implemented fairly and in which all staff work purposefully and conscientiously. Some unique challenges are however evident. For example, at this point in time, decreased enrolment has resulted in some classes being reduced to one pupil or none. School policy with regard to the promotion of pupils has accentuated this process. The result has been a poor learning dynamic in some classes making it more difficult for teachers to evaluate progress and to ensure meaningful progression in pupils' learning as they move from class to class. Teachers are aware of these challenges and strive to have high yet realistic expectations of the pupils which are relevant to their age.

• Responses from parents' questionnaire indicated that they believed teaching to be good in the school and were happy with the overall work of the school. With regard to pupil achievement, standardised test scores (Micra-T and Sigma-T) in reading and in Mathematics attainment compare favourably with expectations.

• Tá dáiríreacht na n-oidi faoi chur chun cinn na Gaeilge le moladh. Cothaítear suim na ndaltaí sa Ghaeilge trí cheachtanna a chur i lathair go bríomhar. Úsáidtear modhanna múinte oiriúnacha. Bunaítear an t-ábhar foghlama, go rialta, ar théamaí a bhaineann le saol agus le taitlí na ndaltaí. Cuítear béis ar thorbairt fhocloirí ná ceachtanna. Chun caighdeán na h-oibre a ardú a thuilleadh, b'fhiú do n bhfoireann plean forbartha nua don Ghaeilge a chur le chéile ina gcúirtear béis ar leanúnachas na foghlama, ar chruinneas foghraióchta na ndaltaí agus ar thorbairt na cumarsáide. B'fhiú dóibh, chomh maith féachaint ar chlár foghlama comhtháití ar nós 'Seidean Sí' chun an obair a threorú.

The dedication of the teachers in promoting Irish is commendable. Pupils' interest in Irish is promoted through lively lessons and suitable teaching methods are used. Learning themes are, regularly, based on the lives and on the experiences of pupils. Vocabulary development is emphasised in all classes. To further develop standards, it would be worthwhile for the teachers to develop a new strategic plan for Irish which emphasises continuity of learning, accurate pronunciation as well as the communicative ability of pupils. It would also be worthwhile, in that respect, to consider integrated learning programmes such as 'Seidean Sí' as a means of directing this work.

• English is taught effectively in the school. Pupils, generally, listen attentively and communicate confidently orally and in written form. Their literacy attainments assist then in their learning in other curricular areas and there is a commendable focus on language development across the curriculum. Good supports are in place for pupils with specific
literacy challenges and a wide range of interventions and programmes are used. The results of standardised tests (Micra-T) indicate satisfactory standards with regard to the overall reading ability of pupils. Pupil questionnaires indicated that all pupils have positive self images with regard to their ability to read and all parents believe the school is helping their child(ren) to progress with reading. Across the school, there is evidence of a balanced oral, reading and writing programme within which the abilities of pupils are developed and nurtured.

- It is recommended that, in the context of literacy development targets, consideration be given to further developing interest in reading through the provision of a wider range of appropriate reading material in class libraries. It is also recommended that greater priority be given to the presentation and display of pupil’s written work. This should be in conjunction with a whole-school focus on penmanship as a greater balance needs to be attained between the writing process and the quality of the finished product in writing.

- Standardised test results (Sigma-T) in Mathematics indicate satisfactory results in line with expectations. Lessons observed were well structured and learning outcomes were clear. Good use is made mathematical equipment and pupils display a good understanding of number facts and of mathematical skills. All parents believe that the school is helping their child(ren) to progress in Mathematics and all of the pupils surveyed believe that they are doing well at Mathematics. In order to further develop the standards in this area and promote a positive image of the subject, it is recommended that mathematical trails are developed in the immediate environment and that problem solving be incorporated further into the mathematics programme. It is also recommended that the language of Mathematics should form a regular feature of all mathematics lessons. The use of calculators should be encouraged in accordance with the curriculum guidelines.

- Geography is taught effectively in the school and all three strands, human environments, natural environment and environmental awareness and care, are given consideration. Lessons are well structured and good use is made of appropriate resources such as maps, globes, ICT and other materials. In order to further improve Geography teaching and learning, it is recommended that the staff consider, when appropriate, the advantages of mapping the school and its environment, engaging in investigative cross-curricular projects which might combine text and illustrative work, developing projects which might investigate phenomena such as weather, or, engaging in field trips with the assistance of parents or local experts.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Overall, the quality of support for pupils with additional educational needs is very good. Pupils with special educational needs are supported by one part-time teacher. Support is provided in both literacy and numeracy and a number of pupils have been allocated resource hours. A variety of strategies are used to support pupils with high incidence or low incidence learning needs. Individual learning programmes have been devised for all pupils in receipt of additional supports and learning targets are based on individual pupil’s priority needs. Observed lessons were well structured and interactions between teachers and pupils in receipt of supplementary teaching were very positive.

- Assessment practices are good and careful records are maintained.

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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

Improving school image: We agree that a school’s image is vital within a small community, and we are grateful for the invitation to develop new ways of strengthening our image.

Handwriting: We agree with the cirgire’s appraisal of the need for improvement in student handwriting, and have been taking steps within the School to address this issue.

Internal promotion: We are committed to seeing that all students follow the full eight-year school cycle, and will do our utmost to ensure each student is provided with every academic opportunity needed to succeed.

Physical Deficiencies: Thank you for encouraging us in improving our building and the learning environment. We know how vital the physical environment is to a wholesome academic environment.

Declining enrolment trends: We are acutely aware that our small numbers are hazardous to our future, and we are taking all possible steps to remedy this. Simultaneously, while we are small, we feel there are many benefits to our small school environment.

School Policies: We agree that our policies should serve the student demographic and be developed according to the Department of Education and the Church of Ireland.

Parental Questionnaires: “Parental questionnaire responses indicated all of the parents surveyed consider” ….might better be phrased, all parents returned their surveys and all stated that the school was well run.

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

School image: We have initiated a school newsletter, keeping the local community apprised of the latest developments within the school and the successes of the students. Further, the Principal, after consultation with parents and members of the Board of Management has, developed a School Brochure, outlining the school’s mission and purpose, announcing to all the pride we have in Saint Matthias National School.

Through the leadership of the Principal we have successfully hosted Run West Cork, a fundraiser in our local community to aid schools and a local hospital. It was well supported with over 26 entrants and brought a boost to the entire community of Ballydehob.

The Board of Management and the School Trustees have agreed to permit Jazz Musicians to perform a concert during the Ballydehob Jazz festival as a way to promote an enthusiasm for Jazz music among the young. The event is fully insured, and will be well supervised.

Physical deficiencies: As a means to improving our learning environment, we have had the entire exterior of the school and gates painted; in addition we had an architect draw up various designs for a new entry way, which would reallocate space for students, teachers and parents.

School enrolment: We recently hosted one open day with the theme of science. It was a tremendous success and very well attended. We are planning to host another open day later in the school term. This together with the School brochure and newsletter will make the school more accessible.
**Handwriting:** There has been a concerted effort in developing our students’ handwriting skills, and we are proud of their achievements. Their good work is displayed throughout the school, encouraging the students, parents and teachers alike.

**Irish:** The Principal is looking into a pilot programme of Séideán Sí beginning next school term.