WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Maryboro National School, Portlaoise was undertaken in February 2010. 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, Irish, Mathematics and Drama. 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

Maryboro National School is a co-educational primary school located in the town of Portlaoise, county Laois. The teaching staff comprises three mainstream class teachers, a shared-learning support/resource teacher and a shared resource teacher for Travellers. The school caters for pupils from the parish. Pupil attendance is good overall and there has been an increase in enrolments in recent years which has added greatly to the diversity of the school population. The main school building was erected in 1897 and was extended in 1987. A prefabricated classroom was added in 2004. The lack of room for expansion and the location of the school beside a busy main road are causes of concern for the board of management. The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>2 (shared)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>2 (1 full-time and 1 part-time)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision
Maryboro National School is a Church of Ireland school under the patronage of the Bishop of Cashel and Ossory. The ethos of the school is Christian and this is reflected in the work of the school particularly in school assemblies, preparation for school and church services and regular visits from the Rector. The school seeks to provide a climate in which all pupils find encouragement to develop spiritual and moral values together with personal and social skills. The school’s aim is to educate its pupils in accordance with the Christian principles of love and respect for God and for other people. Interactions between all members of the school community are characterised by a sense of mutual respect.

1.2 Board of management
The board of management is properly constituted and operates in accordance with the publication of the Constitution of Boards of Management and Rules of Procedure (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Meetings are held about five times a year and minutes are maintained. Issues discussed include the school’s finances and the maintenance of the school building. The principal presents a report to inform members about all school issues and the treasurer’s report gives details on the management of the school’s finances. A sub-committee of the board was set up to explore
the possibility of developing a new school and at the time of the inspection this work was ongoing. It was reported that the board plays a role in the development of the school plan, most notably the organisational policies. The board should satisfy itself that all policies are signed by the chairperson on ratification and that a date for review is included. The board cited the inclusive atmosphere, music and the quality of the educational provision as the key strengths of the school.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team is comprised of the principal and deputy principal and the commitment of both teachers to the development of the school is commendable. The diligence and effective interpersonal and organisational skills of the principal support the successful management of the school. The meticulous maintenance of school registers in accordance with Rule 123 (1) of the Rules for National Schools demonstrates the administrative competence of the principal. The high expectations for the school which are set by the principal are supported by the deputy principal who undertakes a range of curricular, organisational and pastoral duties. Both post holders work in close collaboration on all school issues and utilise their individual strengths and abilities to provide clear direction to the school. To further develop the instructional leadership role of the in-school management team, consideration should be given to establishing a practice of regularly reviewing duties attaching to posts of responsibility in line with Circular 07/2003 of the Department to ensure they continue to reflect evolving school needs. The staff is very supportive of the management and staff meetings are held three times a year to discuss issues relating to the operation of the school.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
Very effective structures are in place to promote positive relations and communication with the school community. The parents’ association, which is affiliated to the National Parents’ Council (Primary) meets on a regular basis and supports the school through its fundraising activities and by participating in school events. Information for parents regarding their children’s education and pupils’ progress is communicated regularly and appropriately through informal systems and through parent-teacher meetings, newsletters and written school reports.

1.5 Management of pupils
The management of pupils in the school is of a high standard. Procedures, activities and expectations at a whole-school level enable pupils to develop respect for themselves, for others and for the local environment. Positive reinforcement and affirmation of pupil behaviour is used throughout the school and pupils demonstrate an interest in their work. Overall, there is a pleasant and welcoming atmosphere evident in the school and pupils display confidence, courtesy and respect appropriate to their age. The work of the two special needs assistants, one of whom is also the part-time school secretary, contributes positively to the overall work of the school. Outside tutors provide extracurricular activities in music and games and these are funded by parents’ voluntary contributions.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The school has developed a wide range of organisational and procedural policies with the assistance of cuiditheoirí to respond to legislative requirements and the evolving needs of the school. The quality of whole-school planning is satisfactory. Curriculum plans have been devised for all aspects of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and they are closely aligned to its structure and content. They are general in nature and it is recommended that as the plans are reviewed, they should be contextualised further to the needs of the school and should clarify the
progression in content for pupils within the multi-class context to ensure the implementation of a broad, balanced, spiral and developmental curriculum throughout the school. The school has prioritised drama and mathematics for review and this should provide teachers with an opportunity for self-evaluation and reflection and should enable them to include additional curricular guidance that will have a greater impact on individual teacher planning and on the quality of teaching and learning in these areas.

The quality of classroom planning is good and teachers present long and short-term plans to support their work. The impact of individual teacher planning on the implementation of the curriculum would be enhanced if there was a consistent approach to the format and layout of planning documents and if they provided greater clarity in relation to programme content, methodologies, resources and differentiation. Individual teachers maintain monthly progress records. The learning-support/resource teacher prepares comprehensive individual education plans (IEPs) for pupils in receipt of extra support and these are reviewed on a regular basis and shared with mainstream class teachers and parents. Team teaching takes place in some classes and excellent plans outlining the work carried out in these learning situations are maintained.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures
The board of management has not formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2001) in compliance with Department of Education and Science Primary Circular 0061/2006. The child protection procedures should be formally discussed by the management, school staff and parents. It is recommended that a copy of the procedures be provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management ensure 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. It is recommended that this issue be prioritised for discussion and that the board satisfies itself that it is in compliance with all aspects of the circular.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

Gaeilge
Múintear an Ghaeilge go leordhóthanach sa scoil. Cruthaítear timpeallachtaí bríomhara chun tacaíocht a thabhairt do mhúineadh na teanga sna seomraí ranga agus chun dearcadh dearfach a spreagadh i leith na nGaeilge. Tríd an scoil úsáideann na hoidí modhanna múinte éagsúla le linn na gceachtanna a bhí a n-áirítear druileanna, cluichiú teanga, an modh cloislabhartha chun cumas cumarsáide na ndaltaí a phholruit. Déantar cúnamh cuí de cheithire shnaithe an chúraclaim. Cuirtear bheim ar chur i bhfeidhm na feidhmíonna teanga i gcomhthéacs na téamaí chun na daltaí a spreagadh. Ag leibhéal sósísearach na scoile tugtar ionchur teanga do na daltaí trí úsáid a bhaint as fearais cuí agus Íhsair leirithe. Sna mbeannanna agus na hoibranganna spreagtar na daltaí chun cainte trí straitéisí mar chomhrá beirt, nuacht shimplí agus rólghlacthach. Ceanglaítear an léitheoireachta agus an scribhneoireachta leis an éisteacht agus an labhairt. Ba chóir don fhoireann tuilleadh bhéime a leagan ar fhorbairt na scileanna léitheoireachta go cósasach. D’fhéadfaí freisin, tuilleadh tairbhe a bhaint as filiocht agus as amhránaíocht chun cumas cainte na ndaltaí a fhorbairt.

Irish
Irish is taught adequately in the school. Stimulating environments are created to support the teaching of the language in the classrooms and to stimulate a positive attitude towards Irish.
Throughout the school teachers use a variety of methodologies during lessons including drills, language games, direct teaching and the use of audio visual resources to develop pupils’ communicative abilities. Appropriate attention is afforded to the four strands of the curriculum. Emphasis is placed on the implementation of the language functions in the context of the themes to stimulate pupils. Pupils at junior levels receive language inputs through the use of appropriate materials and visual aids. In the middle and higher classes conversation is encouraged through the use of paired work, simple news and role-play. Work in reading and writing is linked to listening and speaking activities. The staff should, however, place more emphasis on the systematic development of reading skills. Greater benefit could also be derived from poetry and song to develop pupils’ oral capabilities.

**English**
The quality of teaching and learning across all strands of the curriculum in English is good. Teachers present well-structured lessons and confidently use a variety of teaching approaches including whole-class teaching, group work and paired work. Opportunities are provided for the development of pupils’ oral language competencies through the use of discrete oral language lessons and through talk and discussion based on topics in a range of subject areas. In the infant classes a language development programme is in place and is effectively implemented. It is recommended that this approach be further developed throughout the school and be linked to the content objectives of the English curriculum. Pupils in some classes recite a wide repertoire of poetry and it is recommended that this good practice be further extended.

In the infant and junior classes, pupils’ reading skills are nurtured through the development of phonological and phonemic awareness and a structured phonics programme is utilised to support this approach. At the emergent reading stage, shared readers and large-format books are used to model the reading process and to extend pupils’ vocabulary. There is an integrated approach to the development of oral, reading and writing skills in the middle and senior classes. Pupils’ sight vocabulary and comprehension skills are developed incrementally and pupils are actively encouraged to foster an interest in reading through DEAR (drop everything and read) time and paired reading. Most pupils read fluently and articulately and can discuss material read competently. Pupils are making very good progress in English reading as is evidenced in standardised test results. Pupils develop a shared response to fiction through the use of class novels and a broad range of library books across a range of genres is provided in each classroom to support this work.

Pupils are provided with ongoing opportunities to engage in a variety of writing activities and an emphasis is placed on the development of the writing process. In the infant classes, the teacher sometimes acts as scribe to assist with accuracy and presentation. Pupils learn to name and form individual letters. The use of effective questioning techniques helps pupils to plan and structure the content of their writing in the middle and senior classes. Written work is consistently well monitored and corrected by teachers and grammar and spellings are well taught. Pupils have opportunities to respond to text and to make booklets from reviews on stories read. It is recommended that pupils’ written work be extended, using information and communication technology (ICT,) and celebrated throughout the school.

**3.2 Mathematics**
The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good. Mathematics-rich classroom environments have been developed through the display of an effective range of learning resources that reinforce and consolidate mathematical concepts. Active learning methodologies are utilised and excellent examples of differentiation were viewed during the inspection. A wide range of resources is available to support the implementation of the mathematics curriculum in the school.
In the infant and junior classes, good use is made of number stories, concrete materials and the classroom environment to develop and reinforce the pupils’ understanding of number. Pupils’ concept of money is systematically developed in the middle and senior classes using active learning methods and mental mathematics. Pupils capably solve oral mathematical problems in these classes. In the senior classes, pupils engage efficiently with a range of strands such as shape and space and measures. The majority of pupils estimate with accuracy and display a good understanding and recall of number facts. The range and quality of pupils’ written work in Mathematics and the methodical way in which it is monitored and corrected merit praise. Pupils’ attainment in Mathematics is good. Overall, pupil engagement with mathematical activities is effective and a very positive attitude to Mathematics is evident throughout the school.

3.3 Drama
The quality of teaching and learning in drama is good. The pupils engage enthusiastically in lessons which are aimed at developing their imagination and enhancing their understanding of human feelings, ideas and experiences. Story is used effectively as a stimulus in infant classes and the teacher acts in role to enable the pupils to explore characters and stories they are familiar with. In middle classes pupils are encouraged to make drama through the interaction of fictitious characters in particular settings. Various aspects of life are explored in this manner and pupils demonstrate competence and confidence in their ability to act in role and to develop critical social skills. They are very willing to talk about their work and display an ability to make choices and analyse problems while in role. Pupils’ engagement with characters in the senior classes ensures the consolidation of learning through age-appropriate activities. Discussion, story, photographs and a wide variety of activities such as prediction and visual representation are used to develop pupils’ knowledge and understanding of people. This subject is developing well and now needs to become embedded in the curriculum of the school. The pupils’ annual visit to the Dunamase Theatre is a commendable aspect of their drama experience.

3.4 Assessment
Teachers engage efficiently in both formal and informal assessment. A range of assessment instruments is used in the school including teacher observation, teacher-designed tests and monitoring of pupils’ work. All teachers maintain good records of pupils’ progress including checklists, portfolios and test results. Written work in copybooks is monitored consistently. Early screening using the Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP) and Middle Infants Screening Test (MIST) are used in the infant classes. Results of these tests inform the development of early intervention strategies in the school. Standardised and diagnostic testing is carried out in literacy and numeracy in all classes from first to sixth class. The outcomes are used to inform teacher planning and the differentiation of teaching and learning for pupils. They are also used during parent-teacher meetings to communicate pupils’ progress to parents. Diagnostic testing is undertaken with parental consent to identify priority learning needs and in planning future programmes of work particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs. The learning-support/resource teacher systematically maintains a range of data to document pupils’ progress and the individual education plans (IEPs), which have been compiled record decisions taken in consultation with parents on learning programmes for individual pupils. These plans are of a very high quality.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
The provision of support for pupils with special educational needs is a key strength of the school. The school has a shared learning-support/resource teacher based in a neighbouring school. Delivery of supplementary support is undertaken primarily in the areas of literacy and numeracy.
There is very good communication between the support teacher, mainstream class teachers, parents and the principal. A newly-refurbished support room in the school playground provides the setting for support teaching when pupils are withdrawn on a one-to-one basis or in group settings. Teaching is based on the specific learning targets outlined in pupils’ IEPs. External assessments are used as a central resource in the compilation of these plans and the advice of external professionals is sought if necessary to identify strategies to meet learning needs. The level of support provided is in line with pupils’ learning needs, targeting most support at those most in need. Groups are efficiently targeted for literacy and numeracy interventions where appropriate.

The relationship between the pupils and the support teacher is excellent and the teacher is to be praised for the manner in which she builds pupils’ self-esteem. Lessons are well-structured and are tailored to address the specific learning targets within the pupils’ individual plans. A range of teacher-designed and commercially available materials is used to support teaching and learning. Pupils engage actively in the learning situations provided and their efforts are appropriately affirmed and encouraged. Support teaching focuses on the development of strategies to enable pupils to become independent and self-reliant learners as well as covering material to support and consolidate learning in the classroom.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
A caring, welcoming and homely atmosphere is created for all pupils in the school. Discreet provision is made from school funds to ensure that all pupils participate fully in school life and its associated activities. The school is proud of its inclusive atmosphere and the school avails of the services of a shared resource teacher for Travellers.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The principal and staff work effectively as a team and share their individual talents for the benefit of the pupils.
- The board of management and parents’ association actively support the work of the school.
- The provision for special educational needs is a key strength of the school.
- The pupils are courteous and respectful in their relationships with adults and peers and display a high level of engagement in their work.

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

- The board of management should satisfy itself that all school policies are signed by the chairperson on ratification and include a date for review and that the school has clear and effective child protection procedures in place which are in accordance with Circular 0061/2006 of the Department.
- When the school development plans are being reviewed it is recommended that they provide more direction to teachers in order to support the implementation of a broad and balanced curriculum in the multi-class context.
• The school should develop a policy in relation to an agreed approach to writing in the school which includes guidance on the celebration of pupils’ written work and the use of information and communication technology.

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.