Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Mary’s National School
Ardvarney, County Leitrim
Uimhir rolla: 15116D

Date of inspection: 18 June 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Saint Mary’s National School was undertaken in June 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 Geography. The board of management 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

Saint Mary’s National School is a co-educational, rural primary school situated in Ardvarney approximately five kilometres from Dromahair in north County Leitrim. Its pupils are allocated to two mainstream classrooms; the junior room accommodates nineteen pupils up to and including second class and the senior room accommodates eighteen pupils from third to sixth class. The pupils’ overall attendance patterns are very good.

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>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>2 (including the teaching principal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>1 (based elsewhere)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
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Using ancillary staff grants provided by the Department of Education and Skills, the board of management employs a part-time cleaner and, as the need arises, a caretaker. The board does not employ a school secretary currently.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The school, under the patronage of the Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, has a Roman Catholic ethos. During the evaluation, there was a welcoming atmosphere in the school. All of the staff work in a spirit of collaboration and support each other in their work. Opportunities are provided for the pupils’ involvement in a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities including pantomimes, sports, Discover Primary Science, the Green-Schools Programme, Active Schools, the MS Readathon, the K’NEX Engineering Challenge and inter-school quizzes.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and is very supportive of the work of the school. It meets regularly and minutes are taken of proceedings. Board members have attended relevant management training. The various talents of individual members are used to good effect.
The chairperson visits the school regularly and remains in close contact with teachers and pupils. The board members are commended for their ongoing and dedicated commitment to the school.

Updated accounts are presented by the treasurer at each meeting. The school accounts have been audited recently in accordance with diocesan policy. The board endeavours to address any resource and infrastructural deficits as the need arises and it discusses and ratifies school organisational and curriculum policies on an ongoing basis. The board is satisfied with the overall education provided in the school and commends the teachers for their willingness to innovate and for their inclusive approach.

The school presents very well and is maintained to a very good overall standard. It has just been awarded its fourth green flag. Recently, the board has overseen the electrical upgrading of the school, the provision of additional storage space, the installation of interactive whiteboards for both classrooms, and the improvement of parking facilities. Built in 1965 as a two-classroom structure, the internal infrastructure is now unsatisfactory in terms of administrative and meeting space. As funding becomes available, the board intends to improve the internal infrastructure. Road-bound on two sides, the school site is quite restricted. However, the external playing areas are very pleasant and well maintained.

1.3 In-school management

The overall quality of in-school management is good. Appointed to her post in January 2010, the principal discharges her duties in an effective, professional manner. She is very committed to her work and has identified relevant priorities for curriculum, resource and administrative development. She has diligently progressed the organisational and curriculum planning process, a process ably initiated by the previous school principal. School rolls and registers are maintained with great care and accuracy. A substitution system for the principal’s release days is organised efficiently in co-operation with other local schools.

The principal is fully accountable to the board of management for the day-to-day management of the school and provides updates at each board meeting. It is recommended that an account of the pupils’ literacy and numeracy progress be included, at least annually, as part of the principal’s report to the board. As a new appointee, the principal is advised to access support from the Regional Support Service for Teachers at the commencement of the new school year 2010-2011.

The assistant teacher has been appointed to the school very recently and provides good support to the principal. It is recommended that the board finalises an appointment to the vacant special duties post as soon as possible.

1.4 Management of resources

The management of resources is good. The classrooms present very well; they are effectively organised, colourful, print and number-rich. The board of management invests regularly in resources for teaching and learning and a detailed inventory of resources has been compiled. There was good use of teaching and learning resources during the evaluation. The desirability of acquiring some additional resources for English and Irish reading and for Geography was discussed with the teachers. More access to and use of information and communications technologies (ICT) by the pupils is recommended. An e-learning programme should be devised for them.
1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The management of relationships and communication with the school community is effective. A clear, useful home-school links policy has been devised. The board and teachers report very significant levels of cooperation from parents and the local community. The parents’ association is very supportive of the school and involves itself in various worthwhile activities including fundraising, fun days and assisting in extracurricular activities. Officers of the association report satisfaction with the overall education provided, with the many opportunities for pupils to try new things, with the easy accessibility afforded to parents by teachers and with the communication procedures established with the board of management.

The teachers convene formal parent-teacher meetings annually and issue informative end-of-year reports on the pupils’ progress. Regular information notices about school activities are also issued. The parents’ association officers report that parents have ready access to school policies and they look forward to further involvement in the school planning process in co-operation with the board and staff. The development of a parents’ association newsletter was mooted at the pre-evaluation meeting; this should be progressed as soon as it is feasible.

1.6 Management of pupils

During the evaluation, the management of pupils was satisfactory. In the classrooms, seating arrangements were conducive to group work and peer-interaction and most pupils were well behaved, co-operative and friendly. The routines and protocols implemented were generally effective and they simplified and enhanced the day-to-day life of the school. The good practice of using Irish in the day-to-day management of pupils as observed in one classroom should be progressed throughout the school.

It is recommended that an audit of the school’s existing code of behaviour be undertaken to ensure its accord with the guidelines from the National Educational Welfare Board (Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools, NEWB 2008). The audit checklist developed by the NEWB will be a useful starting point for this work.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of school planning is good. A wide range of administrative plans and policies is available and most have been discussed and ratified at board of management level. Useful action plans have been drafted. Curriculum plans are available for each of the four subjects being evaluated. More clarity regarding the programme content for Irish across its four strands is necessary; this will be essential in ensuring the whole-school implementation of the programme and in enabling ongoing school self-evaluation in the subject.

Teachers’ individual classroom planning is satisfactory. It is advised that the teachers place a greater focus on the coverage of curriculum objectives in their monthly reporting especially in oral English and in Irish.
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 Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Published 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 Language

Gaeilge
Moltar díograis na n-oidí maidir le teagasc na Gaeilge. Cuirtear raon acmhainní ar fáil do mhúineadh na Gaeilge agus baintear féidhm éifeachtach astu. Sna bunranganna, úsáidear cluichí, scéalaiocht agus gníomhaíochtaí simplí eile go rialta chun foclóir a mhúineadh. B’fhíú freisin fócas breise a chur ar aithris agus athrú agus ar úsáid druilleanna cruthaitheacha. Sna hardranganna, múintear foclóir nu a go cumasach dona daltaí agus tá stór reasúnta leathan ainmhcótaí agus aidiachtaí ar eolas ag an tromlach. Moltar forbairt a dhéanamh ar an gcumasáid sa teanga trasna na scoile agus níos mó béime a thabhairt d’agallaimh bheirte, don ról, don dramaíocht agus do straitéisí cruthaitheacha. B’fhéidir fós an toradh a bhíonn ar teanga na ndaltaí go nádúrtha. Dá bhri sin is gá mo dhaoine aistriúchán a sheachaint le linn an teagaisce. B’innsholáidh freisin úsáid an Gaeilge a chleachtadh go leanúnach in ábhar éife id é sin go nádúrtha. Dá bhrí sin is gá deich tharrnaí a sheachaint le linn an teagaisce. Moltar foclóir nua go cumasach dona daltaí agus tá stór reasúnta leathan ainmhcótaí agus aidiachtaí ar eolas ag an tromlach.

Leagtar béim rialta ar an léithéideachta Ghaeilge agus léann tromlach na ndalatuí os ard go cumasach. Is féidir leo siúd ceisteanna simplí bunaíthe ar an méid atá leithethe a thabhairt go sásúil. Moltar scéim chéimnithé léithéideachta a úsáid ó rang a dó ar aghaidh agus níor mhiste cur leis an raon agus ãbhar léitheoirí ar an choríocht. Tá céadú foineolaíochta de dhíth ar bhonn scoile uile.

I gcoitinne, tugtar cleachtadh cuí do dhaltaí sa scríbhneoireacht Ghaeilge agus léann tromlach na ndaltaí os ard go cumasach. Is féidir leo siúd ceisteanna simplí bunaíthe ar an méid atá leithethe a thabhairt go sásúil. Moltar scéim chéimnithé léithéideachta a úsáid ó rang a dó ar aghaidh agus níor mhiste cur leis an raon agus ãbhar léitheoirí ar an choríocht. Tá céadú foineolaíochta de dhíth ar bhonn scoile uile.

Irish

The teachers’ diligence in teaching Irish is commended. A range of resources is available for teaching Irish and they are used effectively. In the junior classes, games, stories and other simple activities are used regularly to teach vocabulary. Additional focus on repetition and on the use of creative drills would also be worthwhile. In the senior classes, new vocabulary is taught capably to pupils and the majority have acquired a reasonably wide store of nouns and adjectives. It is recommended that communication in the language be developed throughout the school with more emphasis on peer discussion, role play, drama and other strategies to strengthen language fluency. It would improve matters further if additional emphasis was placed on verbs and tenses.
It is very important for the pupils that they hear the language being used naturally. Therefore it is necessary to avoid translation during teaching. It would be very beneficial also if Irish was utilised consistently in another subject area of the curriculum.

Regular emphasis is placed on reading Irish and the majority of pupils read aloud ably. They are able to answer simple questions based on the text satisfactorily. It is recommended that a graded reading scheme be used from second class onwards and that the range and subject matter of reading materials available in the school are augmented. A whole-school phonological programme is required.

In general, appropriate practice is given to pupils in functional writing but they rarely write personal stories. Development of the basic skills of writing is necessary and more opportunities should be provided for pupils to write in different genres. It would be worthwhile also if an assessment plan for Irish was put in place in order to direct work in the subject into the future.

English
The quality of teaching and learning in English is good overall. Teachers provide regular opportunity for talk and discussion in lessons. However, more opportunities for targeted pupil-pupil discussion would be beneficial as would increased focus on the oral language curriculum objectives. The allocation of discrete oral language time should be considered. Rhymes and poems are taught in both classes but more emphasis on this area is recommended for the senior classes. Overall, a more systematic approach to the development of oracy skills is recommended throughout the school.

In the junior classes, reading is taught in a consistent, successful manner. Most pupils have good phonological awareness and phonemic skills. Paired and buddy reading systems are utilised. In the senior classes, the pupils’ reading skills are developed appropriately. The pupils read expressively and confidently using a variety of reading texts. Recreational reading is promoted to good effect throughout the school. To enhance the reading programme, the use of class novels should be promoted further. The pupils’ overall attainment in standardised reading tests is satisfactory.

In the junior classes, the pupils’ pre-writing and early writing skills are progressed well. In the senior classes, the writing activities are developed appropriately and most pupils write effectively in a variety of genres. The introduction of writing folders should be considered in addition to the development of the drafting, redrafting and editing process. In both classrooms, there is regular instruction in grammar, punctuation and spelling and most pupils’ use of these conventions is age-appropriate. However, more attention needs to be paid to handwriting and to the presentation of work in both classrooms. Cursive writing is introduced in third class but as many senior pupils do not use it with ease consideration should be given to introducing it at an earlier stage.

3.2 Mathematics
Provision for Mathematics is good overall. There is a mathematics-rich environment, with relevant number facts and charts on display and a satisfactory array of mathematical resources. As appropriate, oral mathematics are an integral part of lessons in both classrooms. There is good use of concrete materials and visual aids in the junior room and most pupils show sound understanding of the work already covered with them. The older pupils have good competency with regard to tables and mental computation and most are confident in the four basic number operations. Further focus on problem solving would be beneficial across the school. Most of the
pupils performed very well in tasks assigned during the evaluation. The pupils’ achievement in standardised tests in Mathematics is good overall.

3.3 Geography

Most aspects of the provision for Geography are effective. Lessons observed were active, participatory and resource rich and the quality of learning was good overall. There was effective use of video and ICT in the lessons and in the junior classes there was good integration of Geography with the Visual Arts. The pupils are encouraged to develop a positive attitude towards the environment. Much of the current teaching programme is based on textbooks and most pupils can recall previous learning effectively. It is recommended that local geography be emphasised throughout the school so that the pupils’ sense of local place is developed. Greater focus on project work is also advised. Additional maps would be beneficial for the senior classes in particular.

3.4 Assessment

The quality of assessment is good overall. In both classrooms there is regular correction of pupils’ work and satisfactory monitoring of learning. The infant pupils are screened for indicators of early learning difficulties and standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics are administered throughout the school, this meeting Departmental requirements in that regard. An appropriate system is in place to track and monitor the pupils’ progress in literacy and numeracy. An assessment file is maintained for every pupil and this is supplemented as the pupils progress through the school. End-of-year progress reports are issued and parents are informed of the results of standardised tests.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

The quality of supports for pupils with special educational needs is satisfactory overall. The learning-support/resource teacher, based elsewhere, visits the school for eleven hours per week. Her planning and recording procedures are very clear, comprehensive and relevant. The pupils’ progress is monitored through the administration of diagnostic tests and a variety of teacher-designed tasks. It is recommended that learning targets and outcomes be shared with parents in a more structured manner. Support teaching is provided in a friendly and supportive environment and the quality of teaching is commendable. Some team teaching occurs for Social, Personal and Health Education in the senior classes and this is progressing well. Additional in-class support should be considered for literacy and numeracy across the school.

The board has appointed two special needs assistants to help care for pupils with special educational needs. Both work diligently and enthusiastically and are a considerable asset to the school.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

Teachers are sensitive to any instances of disadvantage which manifest and endeavour to be as supportive as possible of pupils who may need additional support.
5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The board is very supportive of the work of the school. Its members’ ongoing and dedicated commitment to the school is acknowledged.
- The parents’ association and the general parent body are very supportive of the school and assist in various worthwhile activities.
- There is a welcoming atmosphere in the school. All staff members work in a spirit of collaboration and support each other in their work.
- The school development planning process is operating effectively.
- The quality of teaching and learning is good overall in English, Mathematics and Geography.
- Opportunities are provided for the pupils’ involvement in a range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

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

- A more systematic approach to the development of oracy skills in English is recommended throughout the school.
- Improved provision for handwriting is necessary.
- A more focused approach to the teaching of Irish is necessary especially in respect of the listening and speaking strands. *Is gá cur chuige níos dearfa a chleachtadh maidir le múineadh na Gaeilge agus lena snáitheanna éisteacht agus labhairt ach go háirithe.*

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 B.O.M. of St Mary’s N.S. Ardvarney greatly appreciates the thorough inspection of the school by the School Inspector and accepts the contents and findings of the report.

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