An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Castleblakeney National School
Castleblakeney, Ballinasloe, Co. Galway
Uimhir rolla: 16464I

Date of inspection: 2 December 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Castleblakeney National School was undertaken in November/December, 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, Irish, Mathematics and Social, Personal and Health Education. 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

Castleblakeney National School is a co-educational primary school located on the perimeter of the village of Castleblakeney, Co. Galway. Enrolments in the school have remained stable since the last school report was issued in 1999 and no significant changes in the enrolment pattern are anticipated in the near future. The school was originally built as a two-classroom unit in 1922 and a third classroom was constructed in the early eighties. The most recent major development work occurred in 2006/7 when the school was extended and extensively refurbished to provide bright, modern educational facilities. The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
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<td>Special needs assistants</td>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

Castleblakeney National School is under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Elphin. It is one of seven primary schools in the parish of Ahascragh/Caltra. The school occupies a position of high standing in the local community and the staff, pupils and parents are regularly involved in community events. The school climate is characterised by openness in communication and a strong spirit of collaboration. The school vision is effectively shared and the partners work together to create a structured, caring, happy and safe environment where teaching and learning can be enjoyed and the intellectual, spiritual, physical, moral and cultural needs of the pupils can be addressed through a broad and balanced curriculum.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and functions in a very effective and efficient manner. Agenda and documents for discussion are circulated prior to meetings and tasks are regularly distributed among the members. Minutes of meetings are carefully recorded and indicate that the board’s work of late has encompassed health and safety issues, the appointment of staff, the organisation of a retirement function for the former principal, the development of play facilities and the provision of technological resources. It is apparent that considerable thought and effort has gone into equipping the school. Interactive white boards have been purchased and each curricular area is well resourced. The board, in collaboration with the
teaching staff, has identified development of the school garden, enhancement of the school’s outdoor sports facilities and provision of musical instruments as priorities for the future.

The board is cognisant of its statutory duties and complies with guidelines and regulations in relation to length of the school day, circulation of the school plan, provision of an annual report and the formulation of specific policies. In the interest of safety, the board has recently extended the hard-surface play area and has elicited the support of staff and parents in implementing improved procedures for pupil set-down and collection. As a consequence of ongoing improvements, the school’s health and safety statement requires updating and is currently under review by the board. The accommodation in the school now comprises three bright spacious classrooms, a general-purposes room, a learning-support room, an office, a staff room, a storeroom and toilet facilities. As three support teachers are currently working in the school, the staffroom and the general-purposes room are used periodically for supplementary teaching. There is a need to review the organisation of the support-teaching services in the school and in the light of such review to provide the necessary appropriate accommodation.

The board values and supports the staff’s engagement in continuous professional development. Staff members attend talks, seminars and courses, and pursue further studies. The principal has engaged with the leadership development for schools (LDS) service and the deputy principal and other staff members should engage with this service in the future. Staff meetings are organised each term and provide a forum for the staff to discuss new initiatives, to plan whole-school activities and to establish priorities for future action. The exploration of team-teaching methodologies and training in the use of new technologies have been identified as focus areas for future staff development. It would be of value now to extend the school’s staff development policy to include information on courses provided by the Professional Development Services for Teachers and the Special Education Support Service. It would also be of value to detail initiatives focussed on promoting the use of information and communication technologies in education and those fostering communication between teachers on a national and international basis.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team comprises the principal, deputy principal and a special duties teacher. The principal enunciates a clear vision for the school and exhibits a very positive attitude to promoting change and development. The principal aims to engage the pupils in a broad range of educational activities and to develop in them an awareness and recognition of their own strengths and a respect for the strengths and interests of others. The principal communicates very effectively with all the partners and fosters a high level of collaboration among the staff. Individual teacher strengths and interests are recognised and cultivated, skills are shared and opportunities are provided to collaborate in exploring new methodologies. A staff notice board is used to very good effect to keep all staff members informed of school happenings. A range of strategies are in place to enable the principal evaluate the implementation of the curriculum at the various class levels and regular meetings are organised with the special educational needs team.

The principal receives a very high level of support from the other post holders. Their duties span a very broad range of curricular, organisational and pastoral activities. These duties mainly evolved as the school developed and it would be of benefit now to establish a practice of regularly reviewing the duties of the posts of responsibility and of providing an annual report to the board detailing the work carried out in relation to those duties.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
The school is an integral part of the community and enjoys very good relationships with the parent body, past pupils and the broader community. While there is no parents’ association, parents are actively involved in the life of the school. They work closely with the board raising
funds, organising school functions and assisting with the maintenance of the school building, garden and grounds. Parents are involved in the swimming programme, games training, Christmas concerts and plays. They are very supportive of the school choir’s regular participation in church ceremonies and community events, and frequently help to organise pupil transport to other musical activities, sporting fixtures and quizzes.

A number of strategies operate successfully to sustain meaningful communication with the parent body. Parents receive regular notes and letters from the school and a newsletter is issued twice a term. Contact with individual teachers is maintained through formal and informal meetings and through the use of pupil journals at some class levels. Written reports on individual pupil progress are issued to parents at the end of the school year. The school plan is available for viewing and copies of specific policies are made available to parents at enrolment. While the parent representatives on the board are involved in policy formulation, the formation of a parents’ association would facilitate a greater level of involvement of parents in the planning process.

1.5 Management of pupils
An atmosphere of friendliness and respect prevails in the school. Pupils co-operate readily with the staff and engage enthusiastically in a broad range of activities, many of which foster links with local groups such as the Heritage Centre and the Tidy Towns organising committee. Group work is a regular feature of classroom practice and teachers move between classes to teach particular aspects of English, Mathematics, the Arts and Physical Education. An after-school programme includes games, choral work, music-making and classes in music theory and harmony. School records indicate that the majority of pupils maintain good records of attendance.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The quality of whole-school and classroom planning is good. The school plan comprises a comprehensive document that clearly outlines the school’s organisational and administrative practices, and provides guidance for the implementation of each curricular area. The school has engaged with the planning and curriculum support services on a number of occasions and most recently in relation to the policy on Drama which is in draft format. Evaluation of curriculum implementation is ongoing in the school and specific aspects of the curriculum have been identified for review this year. As part of this process, the staff should focus on clearly identifying the content to be covered at the different class levels in each curricular area and on clarifying how that content is to be addressed in the dual and multi-grade class situations. The school plan effectively guides classroom planning. Long-term classroom planning is very clear and concise in most instances and a common template is used for short-term planning.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures
Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Skills 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

Irish

The teaching of Irish is characterised by variety, effectiveness, fun and enjoyment. Group work and paired work are organised on a regular basis and Irish is used daily as the language of classroom management. From the beginning pupils are enticed to use basic verbs, to form full sentences when appropriate and to pose questions. Language games are capably handled to provide more speaking opportunities for the pupils. The learning is skilfully reinforced through the teaching of rhymes, poems and songs. The pupils develop understanding of a wide range of language including adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and rich idioms of speech. They are given regular opportunities to read a variety of text and to write their own stories. Before leaving the school many pupils are able to converse confidently on specific topics and high standards are attained in reading and writing.

English

English is taught in a creative and effective manner throughout the school. Appropriate emphasis is placed on language development and oral communication skills are also carefully nurtured during lessons in other curricular areas. Through talk, discussion, prompting, brainstorming and the use of a delightful range of poetry, story and song, the pupils are skilfully assisted in choosing words to name and describe things and events. Higher-order thinking skills are purposefully
advanced through careful questioning. Pupils display confidence in oral expression and they readily communicate their ideas and opinions.

Print-rich classroom environments provide appropriate contexts in which to develop the pupils’ reading skills. A range of very attractive materials is provided and enjoyable activities are organised to engage the pupils in the reading process. Parental involvement is encouraged with pupils taking home library and supplementary books on a nightly basis. Pupils display sound understanding of the letter-sound relationships in the junior classes and develop appropriate confidence and fluency in reading as they proceed through the school. While a good range of reading materials is available in the school, there is scope for further development of the classroom library areas in order for them to function as focal points or spaces where a wide range of text may be accessed and where pupils may meet together to talk, listen and read.

Pupils are provided with regular opportunities to engage in writing in different genres and samples of their work are attractively displayed throughout the school. Letter formation is very well taught in the early years and most pupils develop a cursive style of writing in the senior classes. A review of the school policy on handwriting would be of benefit in order to enable all pupils to develop a cursive style in appropriate stages.

3.2 Mathematics
Mainstream teachers and support teachers collaborate effectively to provide appropriately differentiated programmes in Mathematics. Attractive commercially produced and teacher-made charts and materials are used to support teaching and learning. Teachers consistently address the language of Mathematics and pupils use language correctly while manipulating materials and explaining their activities. A lovely range of rhymes, poems and songs is taught in the early years to consolidate understanding of concepts. The strand units are carefully progressed from year to year and previous learning is reviewed creatively from different perspectives. It is advised, however, that at all stages emphasis should remain on using meaningful algorithms for the solution of numerical calculations in preference to using mechanical operations. Commendable efforts are made to draw attention to mathematical features in the environment and the school’s technological resources are used to very good effect to present carefully structured problem-solving activities based on real life situations. Pupils in general display very good understanding of the concepts covered, recall number facts swiftly and record their work neatly. As a means of sharing the existing good practice, it would be of benefit to include in the school plan the successful strategies being used to promote the memorisation of number facts.

3.3 Social, Personal and Health Education
Very good teacher-pupil interaction at each class level aids the implementation of this area of the curriculum. Appropriate whole-school policies have been formulated and a range of programmes is available in the school to guide practice and inform classroom activities. Talk and discussion, mime, poetry, story and song-singing are among the strategies used to focus the pupils’ attention on such topics as healthy eating, good lifestyles, personal growth and development, respecting others and caring for the environment. Substance misuse is also sensitively addressed. The teachers use very good questioning techniques at all class levels and pupils’ existing knowledge and their attitudinal base are ascertained and effectively built upon. The work is skilfully integrated with curricular areas. The school’s participation in national initiatives such as Green Schools, Active Schools and Discover Primary Science serves to enrich the provision further.
3.4 Assessment
All teachers engage in formal and informal assessment for the purposes of monitoring pupil progress in each curricular area and of planning future teaching and learning activities. Checklists, indicators, observations, peer-tutoring, teacher-designed tasks and tests, portfolios and evaluation of project work are among the assessment modes used. Copybooks, workbooks and collections of work indicate that written work is regularly corrected and that high standards of presentation are cultivated from the early years. Belfield Infant Assessment Profiles, the Middle Infant Screening Test and standardised tests in English and Mathematics are used appropriately to identify pupils for early intervention and supplementary teaching. The school has acquired software to facilitate the recording of standardised test results in a manner which will facilitate the tracking of individual pupil progress in the future. The school is encouraged to commence inputting current information in order to establish a comparison base for the year end. Support teachers also carefully monitor progress related to the learning targets set for individual pupils. To aid this process, it is suggested that pupil competencies as recorded in their individual learning programmes should be stated in a manner which clearly establishes the baseline from which the programmes commence.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
The special needs support team comprises a learning-support teacher appointed under the general allocation system, two resource teachers and a part-time special needs assistant. The learning-support teacher is based in the school and also provides a service to another school in the area. The resource teachers are based in two other schools and they visit Castleblakeney N.S. each day. In consultation with mainstream teachers, in-class support is arranged and supplementary teaching is organised on a withdrawal basis for individual pupils and small groups. The provision also incorporates structured play sessions at junior infant level, an early literacy programme at senior infant level, a social skills programme and mathematics lessons for specific class groups. The special needs assistant works under the guidance of the teaching staff and diligently cares for specific pupils and supports them in accessing the full curriculum.

Praiseworthy efforts are made to prepare an individual profile and learning programme or an individual education programme for each pupil identified with learning difficulties or special educational needs. A range of diagnostic tests is available in the school and the learning programmes are appropriately informed by test results, teacher observations and professional reports. Learning targets are clearly stated and teaching approaches, learning activities and resources are identified. Parents are involved in varying degrees in planning and reviewing the programmes. The teachers establish a lovely rapport with the pupils and successfully use visual aids, games and well-structured tasks to enhance skills, knowledge and understanding. The school has one dedicated support room that is very attractively organised and well resourced. Future endeavours to develop the support service in the school should take into consideration a review of the support cluster, provision of appropriate accommodation and further development of the team approach to provision in line with Special Education Circular 02/05.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
The school has a small number of pupils from a distinct minority group. An inclusive and caring atmosphere prevails in the school and the board, staff and parents collaborate to ensure that all pupils are enabled to participate fully in the life of the school.
5. **CONCLUSION**

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school has a very active board of management, a highly committed staff and a very interested body of parents.
- The partners share a vision for the school and strive together to create an inclusive school that maintains strong links with the local community.
- Teaching and learning is of a high standard in each of the curricular areas observed.
- The support team collaborates effectively with mainstream teachers and implements a broad range of programmes to address the specific needs of individual pupils.
- The pupils display confidence and a capacity to engage in a wide range of activities.

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

- There is a need to review the support cluster, to reassess the school’s accommodation needs in relation to supplementary teaching and to develop further the team approach to provision for pupils with learning difficulties and special educational needs.
- Further development of the school plan is required to guide staff development and curriculum implementation.
- The formation of a parents’ association would further enhance the involvement of parents in the life and work 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.

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