Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Finnachta’s National School
Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare
Uimhir rolla: 16908S

Date of inspection: 24 March 2011
1. Introduction

St Finnachta’s National School, Sixmilebridge is a Catholic co-educational primary school. The school population has increased significantly in recent years, rising from 261 pupils in 2003 to 401 pupils in the current school year. The school has sixteen mainstream class teachers.

A whole-school evaluation was undertaken in March 2011. Inspectors observed teaching and learning in English, Irish, Mathematics and Visual Arts in ten mainstream class settings and observed teaching and learning in three support teaching settings. This report presents the findings of the whole-school evaluation.

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

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<th>The following are the <strong>main strengths</strong> of the work of the school:</th>
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<td>• The board of management provides strong direction and management to the school.</td>
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<td>• The in-school management team leads the planning process and co-ordinates a range of initiatives in the school.</td>
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<td>• Provision for pupils with learning difficulties and special educational needs is good.</td>
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<td>• The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good.</td>
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<td>• Very attractive displays of pupils’ work in Visual Arts and other areas of the curriculum are in evidence in the public areas of the school and in the classrooms.</td>
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<td>• Parents are very supportive of the school and indicate high levels of satisfaction with overall school performance. The school plays a central role in community life.</td>
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<th>The following <strong>main recommendations</strong> are made:</th>
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<td>• The board of management should ensure that the integrity of teaching and learning time in the school is preserved and that break times are not extended.</td>
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<td>• Greater attention should be placed on curriculum leadership and on overseeing the implementation of the curriculum plans at all class levels.</td>
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<td>• The standards of pupils’ written work, their oral skills and their reading skills in English and in Irish should be further improved.</td>
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<td>• Assessment practices should be further developed and extended. At all class levels, the teachers should provide for the different abilities and learning needs of the pupils.</td>
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<td>• Pupils who present with learning difficulties should be identified at the earliest possible opportunity and should receive appropriate teaching supports. Early intervention should be prioritised.</td>
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<td>• Further attention should be given to nurturing pupils’ engagement in school life, particularly in the senior classes.</td>
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3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management provides strong direction and management to the school. It meets regularly and manages whole-school matters such as the facilities available to the pupils, finances, home-school links and whole-school planning effectively. Specific duties have been assigned to board members and their commitment to undertaking these roles is very commendable. The board of management is advised to review the standards attained by the pupils, particularly in literacy and numeracy, on a regular basis.

- The main school building is well maintained and the board of management and the staff are commended for their work in creating an attractive environment given the significant space restrictions. However, the current accommodation is not satisfactory for the needs of this developing school population. There are eight classes located in pre-fabricated buildings and the quality of these buildings is poor. The board has acquired a green-field site and is liaising with the Planning and Building Unit of the Department of Education and Skills to secure a new school building.

- The principal, who was appointed in November 2009, is well-respected within the school community. He has well-established organisational systems in place to ensure the effective running of the school and he places commendable emphasis on discipline and behaviour. In order to further build on these strengths, additional attention needs to be given by the principal to curriculum leadership, to the implementation of the curriculum, ensuring consistency in teachers' planning, and conducting rigorous whole-school review and reflection on aspects of teaching and learning.

- The in-school management team works effectively. The members of the team meet regularly and they work with other staff members to devise policies and to lead initiatives in the school. They have devised a strategic plan for their work and this practice is commendable. It is recommended that the curriculum leadership role of the in-school management team should be further augmented.

- The school secretary plays a pivotal role in ensuring the efficient organisation of the school and her contribution to school life was evident during the whole-school evaluation.

- A range of material resources is provided in the school. Interactive white boards are provided in each mainstream classroom. Other material resources such as parallel readers, mathematical equipment and science equipment are available in the central storage area in the school. However, there is a need for the board of management to use available resources to make a significant investment in books (both in English and in Irish) and concrete materials for Mathematics for each class group. The staff should also give further consideration to the more effective use of information and communication technologies to enhance the quality of the lessons presented and the learning experiences provided to the pupils.

- The board of management should review the practice of extending daily break times. It should ensure that the school delivers the prescribed minimum number of teaching hours per day and that break times do not exceed a total of 40 minutes daily. The board should ensure that the school complies with the relevant provisions of the Education Act 1998, the Rules for National Schools and the terms of Circular 11/95 Time in School.

- Overall, the management of pupils in the school is satisfactory. In the infant, junior and middle classes the pupils are well-behaved and their engagement in learning activities is
very commendable. Additional emphasis should be placed, at a whole-school level, on
nurturing the full engagement of pupils as they progress through the school. Pupil
questionnaires indicate that almost half the pupils in the fourth and sixth classes do not
like school or do not enjoy their learning activities. This disengagement from school life is
a matter of concern and should be addressed as a whole-school issue as a matter of
urgency.

- The parents’ association is active in school life. Parents are very supportive of the school
and indicate high levels of satisfaction with overall school performance.

4. **Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation**

- The quality of whole-school planning is good. A strategic plan has been devised and
policies are reviewed and revised on an ongoing basis. Organisational policies are
discussed at board of management meetings and are approved. A summary of policies is
circulated to parents. Some policies are also available through the school’s website.
Comprehensive curricular plans have been devised by the staff and the challenge for
school management is to ensure that these plans are implemented fully in each class
setting.

- The quality of classroom planning varies. Some teachers undertake detailed short-term
plans which are clearly linked to the objectives and approaches of the *Primary School
Curriculum 1999*. In other class settings the planning is presented in a monthly format. It
is advised that, in accordance with Rule 126 of *Rules for National Schools*, short-term
plans take the format of weekly or fortnightly plans in order that more specific learning
outcomes can be identified and that continuity and progression in the coverage of the
objectives of the curriculum can be achieved. A whole-school approach to planning and
recording of progress should be agreed. The monthly progress reports (*cuntais mhíosula*)
should be used for the purpose of on-going review and for overseeing curriculum
implementation throughout the school.

- Support teachers undertake comprehensive planning. Plans are generally detailed with
specific and measurable targets outlined. It is recommended that the special needs team
review the common planning template in use to reflect the individual profile and learning
programme (IPLP) planning template outlined in the *Learning Support Guidelines*.

- School self-evaluation processes are at an early stage of development. Pupils’ progress
in Mathematics and English, as measured on standardised tests, is recorded and
graphed for the whole-school. These results are analysed and initiatives to improve
literacy scores have been identified. This is commendable practice. Use of the *Looking at
our School* document, a publication of the Department of Education and Skills, is
recommended as a basis for whole-school self-evaluation.

- School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular
0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s *Child
Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools*. Evidence was provided to show 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.
5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Overall, the quality of teaching ranges from satisfactory to good. Where good practice was observed the teachers had clear teaching and learning intentions, employed a broad range of methodologies and engaged the pupils in different learning activities. In some settings, the lessons were largely dominated by the textbooks in use and the range of methodologies observed was restricted. Additional focus should be placed on the quality of the learning experiences and improving the learning outcomes of the pupils, particularly in the senior classes. Assessment practices require further development. A whole-school systematic approach to the assessment of pupils’ outcomes and the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning and to assist teachers in differentiating for the varying range of abilities in their class should be devised and implemented.


There is variety in the effectiveness of the teaching and learning in Irish. In the majority of classrooms good emphasis is placed on the pupils communicating and language games, pair work, group work and drama are undertaken. In some classrooms, good use is made of poetry and songs to give the pupils experience of the sounds and structure of the language. This good practice should be extended throughout the school. In the infant, junior and middle classes the participation of pupils in lessons is good and pupils achieved a creditable standard in spoken Irish. In the senior classes, there was a large variation in the spoken abilities of the pupils. The understanding of the pupils in the content covered was weak to fair. It is recommended that additional emphasis be placed on developing the communication skills of the pupils in the senior classes. A good start is made to the teaching of reading in the junior classes. In the senior classes, the pupils’ pronunciation was weak and the pupils displayed a lack of understanding of the work covered. The pupils’ written work was weak and the majority of the samples that were provided during the evaluation were unsatisfactory. Their understanding of grammar was weak in the senior classes in particular. There is a need to improve and develop the standard of reading and writing in the senior classes.

- The quality of the English lessons observed during the evaluation ranged from satisfactory to good. Oral language is taught satisfactorily. In some of the senior classes, the pupils’ abilities to express themselves and to engage in talk and discussion were fair. The more systematic development of oral language in line with the content objectives of the curriculum is recommended. The teaching of reading is good in the majority of the
settings observed. While the results from standardised tests indicate that the majority of pupils achieve within the average range, the literacy levels of pupils could be improved. An emergent reading approach is adopted in the infant class and this commendable practice should be supplemented by the more extensive use of large books, language experience charts, and parallel readers. A consistent whole-school approach to the teaching of phonological awareness should be adopted and implemented. From first class onwards pupils read a combination of class textbooks and novels. In some class settings there was very good attention given to teaching reading skills. There is a greater need, at whole-school level, to review the reading and comprehension strategies taught and to ensure that each reading lesson has a clear objective and learning outcome for the pupils. Very attractive samples of pupils’ writing are on display and functional writing receives considerable attention. The samples of free writing completed during the evaluation ranged from weak to good. They indicate that a more systematic approach to the teaching of writing, such as First Steps Writing, needs to be adopted and implemented.

- The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good. Well-structured lessons, which included a wide variety of methodologies, were observed. Station teaching is undertaken in the middle classes and this collaborative teaching approach should be further extended to provide opportunities to differentiate teaching. The pupils displayed good understanding and confidence in mathematical concepts. To further build on the good work in Mathematics, the teachers should include oral mathematics as a feature of all lessons, develop number-problem strategies through oral activities and balance the exploration of number with the other strands of the curriculum.

- The quality of teaching in Visual Arts is good. The lessons observed were well-structured and provided opportunities for pupils to engage in making art. The interactive whiteboards were used effectively in some settings to provide good stimuli for the lessons. Very attractive displays of pupils’ work are in evidence in most class settings. Where good practice was observed, the elements of art were emphasised and pupils’ creativity and personal responses were fostered and nurtured.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Teaching supports are provided to pupils in Mathematics and English and the quality of teaching in the support settings is good. Teaching approaches such as those promoted in Reading Recovery and Mathematics Recovery should be implemented to support the targeting of pupils with learning difficulties during the early years.

- The organisation of the caseload for learning support should be reviewed. Currently, pupils with identified learning needs receive supports until their scores in standardised tests are in the average range. This policy results in pupils receiving supports for sustained periods over a number of years and limits the number of new pupils who can access additional supports at the start of each instructional term (every thirteen to twenty weeks). Early intervention supports for pupils in the infant classes are limited. The school should ensure that the pupils in junior and senior infants receive the necessary early intervention supports required. Screening of pupils should be undertaken and the staged approach to the provision of supports where class teachers work collaboratively with the special needs team to plan and implement supplementary teaching programmes for pupils with learning difficulties should be implemented. A review of the large numbers of pupils in the senior classes who continue to receive supports should be undertaken.

- Mainstream class teachers should access continuing professional development on matters relating to differentiation and to implementing the staged approach for pupils experiencing learning difficulties in English. The school should ensure that the members
of the special educational needs team can share knowledge and skills with other staff members.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of St. Finnachta’s N.S. welcomes this Whole School Evaluation Report which highlights the strengths of our school.

We welcome the fact that the strong direction of the Board of Management, the support of the parents, the satisfaction of parents with overall school performance and the diligence, commitment and dedication of the teachers is recognised.

Honourable mention is given to the In school Management Team, The Special Education Needs Team and our school secretary.

The teaching and learning in Maths and Visual Arts is highly commended, as are the emphasis on Whole School Planning, Self Evaluation and the implementation of our Child Protection measures.

We also welcome the recognition in the report that the current accommodation is not satisfactory for the needs of our developing school population.

The Board is satisfied that the school is delivering in excess of the prescribed number of teaching hours. Furthermore we commend the staff for their efforts to promote Healthy Eating, Environmental Awareness and active Lunch Breaks.

The Board commends the school staff for the exceptional work in creating a positive environment for pupils where they can actively and creatively experience the full range of subjects on the curriculum. Children in senior classes have ample opportunities to engage with staff and to take on additional responsibilities in the following areas: School Monthly Newsletter, Monthly School Assembly, Paired reading, School Sports Day, Green Schools Committee, Junior Wardens, School Garden, Health Promoting School Committee, Christmas Concert and School Sports Teams (Hurling, Camogie, Soccer, Handball, Rugby, Athletics and Basketball).

Currently the idea of establishing a Student Council is being explored to give children a further say in school matters affecting them.

The Board of Management acknowledges the professional manner in which the inspection was conducted but was disappointed that the tone and content of the post evaluation meeting did not reflect the generally positive feedback given to teachers immediately following the class visits by inspectors.

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

As outlined in the report the school staff has through its self-evaluation process identified initiatives to improve literacy in the school. A summer course was delivered in the school by two staff members to the rest of the teachers on the use of Interactive Whiteboards in enhancing Literacy. This school year the Reading Recovery Programme is being introduced in Senior Infant Classes and Accelerated Reader with both Fifth Classes.

More discretionary time is being given to Literacy in all classes to further improve the reading standard at all levels.
The Board and Staff welcome the advice and recommendations in the report. We will use them as a basis to further enhance the quality of teaching and learning in our school. We will be endeavouring to implement the changes where appropriate in the future.