An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Clarecastle National School
Clarecastle
Co. Clare
Uimhir rolla:17026M

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION
A whole-school evaluation of Clarecastle National School was undertaken in March 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 History. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND
Clarecastle National School is an eighteen teacher, Catholic, co-educational primary school, in the village of Clarecastle, close to Ennis town. The school operates under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Killaloe. Enrolment at the school has remained consistent in recent years and according to the school’s own projections, it is expected that enrolment will increase in the near future. In 2007 a newly constructed school building situated on a large site was opened. This building is bright and spacious and very well resourced and maintained. It has very good facilities which are used to good advantage by the school and the local community. The school also benefits from access to the indoor and outdoor facilities owned by the local Gaelic Athletic Association, located on a site adjacent to the school. At the time of the evaluation, two teachers were job-sharing, one temporary teacher and one substitute teacher were also employed.

The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

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<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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<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
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<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
The school’s stated mission is to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life. A gospel quotation is prominently displayed in the school’s reception area and is reiterated in some of the school’s policies. It is evident that the management, staff and extended school community work cohesively to fulfil the aspiration of living life to the full, which is enshrined in the quotation. A positive atmosphere is in evidence in the school and relationships between the staff and pupils are respectful and affirming. Pupils are given many opportunities to take part in a broad range of extracurricular activities and pupils’ work and achievements are proudly celebrated in the classroom and school environments.

1.2 Board of management
The board of management is properly constituted and meets on a regular basis. Minutes of these meetings are maintained. A framework for best practice has been devised by the board in which clear expectations of members are outlined. The board members are highly committed to the
school and they carry out specific duties efficiently. Board members have availed of training, most recently in relation to enrolment and the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2001). Immense credit is due to the management of the school for planning, overseeing and completing the school’s building project.

The school’s accounts are efficiently managed and are currently being certified. A maintenance plan has been devised for the school building and the board is commended for this work. At each meeting, the issue of running costs is addressed with a view to achieving efficiencies in the operation of the school. Pupils’ safety is effectively addressed and recently the board, in consultation with Clare County Council, succeeded in relocating the point at which pupils access the school.

All policies required by legislation are available. Following a process of formulation by the school staff, the board discusses and ratifies school policies. As a means of developing its practice in this area, it is advised that the school provide further opportunities for parental involvement in policy formulation. At this juncture the board is advised to produce an annual report on the operation of the school outlining developments in the school throughout the year.

The manner in which the teaching staff has been deployed by the board of management is in urgent need of review. In recent years, the school’s learning-support teacher and the resource teacher for Travellers (RTT) have been deployed as mainstream class teachers. This practice is not consistent with Circular 7/99 and Circular 02/05. The board of management should ensure that it is fulfilling its obligations under the Education Act 1998, Section 9(a) and (b): it should ensure the appropriate deployment of all teachers to provide an education that is appropriate to the abilities and needs of all students.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team comprises the principal, a deputy principal, an assistant principal and four special-duties post holders. The principal was appointed to the role in September 2009. He is highly organised and has, since his appointment, engaged in a process of reviewing school procedures as well as organisational policies and curricular plans. His priorities for development are clearly outlined in an action plan. He demonstrates commitment to developing a culture of internal review, and in particular to self-evaluation by teachers. He is keen to encourage openness to change amongst all personnel and to further generate a climate of inclusiveness in all aspects of the functioning of the school. The deputy principal offers considerable support to the principal by engaging efficiently in an extensive range of responsibilities. Her significant role in the completion of the building project is most noteworthy. The team of deputy principal, assistant principal and four special-duties post holders carry out numerous tasks of a pastoral, curricular and organisational nature. All members of the management team devise action plans for their posts in which they outline specific tasks to be addressed and document progress made in fulfilling their roles. There is evidence that all postholders collaborate to a high level and they contribute to the efficient management of the school.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
An active, informed parents’ association supports the work of the school. The association meets regularly and attendance at meetings is good. There is effective communication with the general parent body through the school’s newsletter and the ‘text-a-parent’ facility. As a means of fundraising, the association organises music and language classes outside of school time for which a fee is charged. Talks and demonstrations are also organised for parents. The association also manages the rental of the school’s hall to external agencies. Funds raised are used to purchase resources and to fund various school activities. Recently, members of the association assumed responsibility for organising the school library in collaboration with members of staff.
It is apparent that there is a very good level of community involvement in the life of the school. In recent times, members of the community were given an opportunity to express their preferences regarding the aesthetic enhancements to be made to the school under the Per Cent for Art Scheme. The general community benefits greatly from use of the school’s facilities and access to the school’s hall.

Staff meetings are held regularly and there is evidence of good co-operation between staff members in addressing and advancing whole-school priorities. The school places an emphasis on developing open lines of communication with the home. To facilitate this, annual school reports are issued to parents and school newsletters are distributed regularly. Annual parent-teacher meetings are held and additional meetings between parents and teachers are arranged if necessary. The school’s website is currently under reconstruction.

1.5 Management of pupils
The school’s code of behaviour clearly outlines the expectation that pupils will behave in an appropriate manner on a day-to-day basis and throughout lessons. Guidance is also given in relation to the sanctions which will be imposed where breaches of the code of behaviour occur. During the evaluation pupils engaged enthusiastically with members of the evaluation team and their behaviour was extremely good. In many classrooms, rules are displayed and for the most part, these are enforced consistently. Throughout lessons, pupils’ willingness to contribute to discussions and to express their views is noteworthy. Their ability to co-operate with each other and with their teachers throughout collaborative and co-operative learning tasks is commendable.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The school’s organisational policies provide clear guidance on the functioning of the school and are presented in an exemplary manner. There is evidence of their consistent implementation throughout the school. Dates for review are identified in the case of a number of the school’s policies. In addition, the school has outlined a framework for the review and development of organisational policies and curricular plans in the near future. This cyclical approach to whole-school planning is laudable.

Curricular plans have been devised by the staff and ratified by the board of management. These plans are reflective of the content and methodologies of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and in general, they provide good guidance to teachers. It is advised that in a number of classes there is a need to ensure greater consistency between whole-school plans and classroom practice. There is evidence of good collaboration and sharing of expertise and resources between teachers who teach at the same class level. This is good practice. In Mathematics, a useful school plan is in place, which provides guidance to teachers on the subject content to be taught at each class level. This plan was updated recently to include suggestions from individual teachers regarding active learning methodologies, approaches to problem solving and the use of the environment. The implementation of this plan is inconsistent in the school. All teachers should ensure that the approaches and methodologies outlined in the plan are implemented at each class level in order to counter-balance an over reliance on workbooks in some instances. In History, a carefully drafted plan, which was recently ratified by the board of management, provides a comprehensive rationale and detailed guidance on the key aspects of teaching this subject. Crucially, the plan stresses the importance of achieving balance between the transmission of a body of knowledge and allowing pupils to work as historians. Further development of this plan should, within a
specified period, seek to complete the local History audit, decide on a programme of local studies suitable for the various class levels, and compile a bank of resources to support this work.

All teachers prepare long-term plans and short-term schemes. The quality of these plans is generally good and many teachers provide very good detail in relation to intended learning outcomes and teaching methodologies. There is a critical need for some teachers to plan more specifically for pupils who present with learning difficulties and to document with greater clarity the manner in which lessons will be differentiated to cater for these pupils’ needs. Monthly progress reports (cuntais mhiosula) are compiled by all teachers and maintained centrally by the school principal.

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 Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, 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
Tá cáilíocht na foghlama agus an teagaisc sa Ghaeilge go maith ar an iomlán sa scoil seo, le samplaí dea-chleachtas an-mhaith le sonrú i rangann a áirithe. Moltar iarrachtaí na n-oidí atmaisféar Gaelach a chothú sa scoil agus meon dearfach i leith labhairt na teanga a chur chun cinn i measc na ndaltaí.

Múintear an Ghaeilge go seiftiúil, bríomhar agus dé antar iarracht inmholta tús áite a thabhairt don taithneamh sna ranganna. Úsáidtear raon maith acmhainní agus áiseanna go héifeachtaí, an clár bán idirghníomhach ina measc, mar ábhar taca don fhoghlaíomh. Leagtar béim thorthuíl ar an gcur chuige cumsáideach tríd an scoil. Sna bunranganna churann cumas labhairt agus labhrtha na ndaltaí trí ábhair léirithe, rainn, amhráin, leabhair mhóra, obair bheirte, agus gníomhaíochtaí dea-eagraithe. Leantar go céimniúil leis an obair sna ranganna eile sa chaoi go sroicheann cuid mhaith daltaí cumas labhartha inmholta ag fágáil na scoile dóibh. B’fhéidir, áfach, deiseanna níos rialta a chur ar fáil do dhaltáí Gaeilge labhartha a cheachtadh i nbeirteanna agus i ngrúpaí i gcuid beag ranganna.

Den chuid is mó, baintear leas as téacsleabhair, leabhair saothair agus as an gcéad bán idirghníomhach mar bhunús do thascanna léitheoireachta agus scríbhneoireachta. Léann na daltaí go cruinn soillir agus léiriúnn siad foghraíocht agus tuiscint mhaith ar an ábhar léitheoireachta. D’fhéadfaig éilis an mheadhionta sa timpallacht agus breis ábhar léitheoireachta a chur ar fáil mar thaca don ghné seo den obair. Tugtar deiseanna rialta do na daltaí a gcuideachtaí clárna scríbhneoireachta feidhmíúla agus cruthaitheacha a chleachtadh. Chun barr tairbhe a bhaint amach san obair seo d’fhéadfaí dírithe i sceil níos mó ar an saorscríbhneoireacht agus scríbhneoireacht pearsanta na ndaltaí.
Irish
The quality of teaching and learning in Irish in this school is good overall with examples of very good practice in certain classes. The teachers’ efforts to create an Irish atmosphere in the school and to promote a positive attitude among the pupils to speaking the language are praiseworthy.

Irish is taught in a lively and resourceful manner and a praiseworthy effort is made to prioritise enjoyment in the classes. A good range of resources and aids, including the interactive whiteboard, is used effectively to assist learning. The communicative approach is used to good effect throughout the school. In the junior classes, illustrative materials, rhymes, songs, big books, pair work and well-organised activities are used to develop understanding and speaking. This work is developed incrementally in the other classes so that a good number of pupils achieve a praiseworthy standard on leaving the school. It would be worthwhile, however, in a small number of classes to provide pupils with more regular opportunities to practice spoken Irish, in pairs and groups.

For the most part, textbooks, workbooks and the interactive whiteboard are used as a basis for reading and writing skills. Pupils read accurately, clearly and with good pronunciation and understanding. More environmental print and extra reading material could be provided to support this aspect of the work. Pupils are given regular opportunities to practice their functional and creative writing skills. In order that greater benefit may be derived from this work greater emphasis could be placed on pupils’ free writing and personal writing.

3.2 English
English is well taught throughout the school. Lessons in oral language are well structured and through use of a broad range of contexts, pupils are given valuable opportunities to express their views on age-appropriate topics. In the infant classes, play is used effectively to encourage active involvement in lessons. At this level, pupils recite a broad repertoire of rhymes. At all class levels, talk and discussion and brainstorming are used to encourage participation in whole-class and group discussions and to extend pupils’ range of vocabulary. Pupils are questioned skilfully and lively discussions ensue. In senior classes, pupils take part in debates and they express their well-formulated views persuasively and articulately. Pupils at all class levels enjoy the recitation and exploration of poetry.

The teaching of reading is good throughout the school. In many classes, this work is supported by colourful, print-rich environments which include word walls, samples of pupils’ written work, poetry and interesting thematic displays. Many classes feature attractive book displays and well-stocked libraries and reading corners. In a small number of classes, it is advised that there is a need to generate more stimulating environments to support pupils’ learning and to stimulate their interest in literacy. In junior classes, pupils are introduced to reading using a formal reading scheme and supplementary reading materials. A good emphasis is placed on developing early-reading skills such as sequencing and prediction. Phonological awareness is nurtured systematically. The school is encouraged to place increased emphasis on the provision of informal reading experiences for pupils in junior and middle classes including more extensive use of large-format books and language-experience charts. In middle and senior classes, pupils read from a good range of materials and many read with fluency. Their comprehension skills, most notably the skills of analysis, deduction and inference are very well developed. Pupils are given very worthwhile opportunities to discuss themes and characters in a manner which stimulates
emotional engagement with literacy. All classes enjoy the benefits of regular access to the school’s attractive library.

Pupils at all class levels engage in the writing process regularly. Their desire to write and their early-writing skills are developed with care in the infant classes. Through use of the overhead projector and the interactive white board, teachers lead modelled writing sessions. These lessons are thorough and of immense benefit to pupils. In the middle and senior classes, a wide range of writing tasks is undertaken including poetry, functional writing, procedural writing and creative writing. At many class levels, whole-class writing projects and short stories of a creditable standard are compiled by pupils. When questioned, pupils in the senior classes demonstrated an impressive knowledge of the conventions of grammar and punctuation.

Formal handwriting lessons are taught. However, the standard of penmanship and the presentation of work vary greatly throughout the school. It is noted that the standard of work produced by pupils’ is generally commensurate with the frequency with which teachers correct and monitor this work. It is advised therefore that pupils’ work be more frequently and consistently monitored. The school should also focus on implementing a consistent handwriting policy in order that all pupils will develop a legible style.

3.3 Mathematics
The quality of teaching in Mathematics is good in most classes and in some instances it is excellent. The extent to which the environment is used as a context to enable pupils in the senior classes to use and apply mathematical skills, is deserving of particular praise. As a means of building on much of the good practice observed, it is recommended that teachers focus to a greater extent on the specific language required by pupils to discuss their learning across the mathematics curriculum.

The quality of pupils’ achievement and attainment in Mathematics is commendable. Early mathematical skills are developed satisfactorily in the infant classes where most pupils have a good grasp of the appropriate number ceilings. A good sense of place value is developed in the lower classes and the pupils have a good knowledge of the properties of two and three-dimensional shapes. Pupil in the middle and senior classes are making excellent progress in their learning. They have developed excellent estimation skills, they solve problems enthusiastically and they can discuss the practical application of Mathematics to real-life situations with great confidence and competence. In some instances pupils could be encouraged to use information and communication technology (ICT) more effectively as a means of exploring and investigating number patterns and trends.

3.3 History
The quality of teaching and learning in History is generally good and in some classes it is very good. History lessons are well structured and involve imaginative and creative approaches to the exploration of a range of topics and to generate an interest in historical enquiry. Topics explored extend from the personal and local to items of national and international interest and feature various spheres of human activity over time. A broad range of suitable resources is used, including textbooks. The interactive white board is employed to good effect in many classes. Teachers use questioning and discussion to good effect in their efforts to further pupils’ understanding of time and chronology, change and continuity, cause and effect, and empathy. Guest speakers have addressed pupils in relation to school in times past. Project work is frequently undertaken and well presented, and technology is used to provide virtual access to
places of historical interest. Photographs, artefacts and facsimile documents are used as primary sources of evidence and pupils handle and scrutinise these resources during lessons. Role-play, mime and improvisation provide valuable opportunities for pupils to develop a sense of empathy with the lives of men, women and children in different ages. Story is used skilfully as a basis for lessons, particularly in junior classes.

Many classrooms feature time lines and fine examples of models of historical structures are displayed. A limited amount of field-work has been carried out. In recent times pupils have visited a local castle and the home of Michael Cusack in north County Clare. Locations of historical interest also feature as part of annual school outings.

Pupils respond knowledgably to direct questioning on a broad range of topics. They are also adept at participating in group discussions and reporting back to the class on topics already covered. Pupils’ written work in History is commendable.

3.4 Assessment

The school’s approach to the assessment of pupil progress using standardised and non-standardised tests is clearly documented in the school plan. Standardised tests are administered to all pupils from first to fifth class. The results of these tests are compiled on an annual basis to provide an individual profile of pupil progress in literacy and numeracy. There is scope to develop the pupil profiles to include the outcomes of non-standardised assessment in areas of the curriculum other than literacy and numeracy. In this regard, the staff might usefully consider the approaches advocated in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) publication *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (2008) and adopt a more consistent whole-school approach to non-standardised assessment.

The practice of documenting standardised testing outcomes could be further developed by analysing test data on a more aggregated basis. This analysis could be used as a form of self-evaluation to inform future planning on a whole-school basis. For instance, longitudinal analysis of the performance of cohorts and specific class groupings could be used to provide the staff with feedback on the effectiveness of particular interventions such as station teaching. In this way, the school could begin to use assessment data more effectively to identify learning priorities and outcomes and to inform planning for teaching and learning.

4. Quality of Support for Pupils

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Currently, the school has an allocation of seventy-seven supplementary teaching hours for the purposes of providing additional support to pupils with learning difficulties and special educational needs. This equates to an entitlement to three full-time and one part-time learning support/resource teacher (LS/RT) posts under the terms of circular 24/09. Currently, only two full-time and one part-time post are used for this purpose. The other LS/RT post has been assigned for mainstream class teaching purposes. As a consequence of this allocation, a significant cohort of pupils does not have access to the level of additional support to which they are entitled.

The quality of support provided by the LS/RTs for pupils is very good and complements the learning programmes undertaken in the mainstream classrooms. Pupils mainly access support on a withdrawal basis in three dedicated high-quality, well-resourced rooms. Teaching is sensitive to pupils’ individual learning styles and highly focussed on their identified learning strengths and priority needs. Diagnostic tests are used to inform group or individual profile and learning
programmes (IPLPs) in which realistic and measurable targets are clearly identified and carefully monitored. The quality of record keeping is excellent. Pupils are very motivated and present as enthusiastic participants in the learning process. Individual education plans (IEPs) for pupils with low incidence special educational needs have been developed in consultation with parents.

Station teaching has recently been introduced on a pilot basis in one of the junior infant classes as a form of in-class support. This intervention, aimed at preventing the onset of learning difficulties in literacy is to be commended. Once the full complement of LSRT posts is restored, it should be possible to extend this intervention to other classes in a more focussed way and to target early intervention strategies in numeracy.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
The provision for Traveller pupils in this school is inadequate. Currently, sixteen pupils from the Traveller community are enrolled in the school. These pupils are well integrated with their peers in the day-to-day life of the school and some are making acceptable progress. However, in other instances, individual attendance and attainment give cause for significant concern. Under the terms of Circular 7/99, the school has been allocated a Resource Teacher for Travellers post to cater for the educational needs of Traveller children.

At present, two members of the LS/RT team provide support in literacy to Traveller pupils in the senior classes but this is not proportionate to the level of resourcing available to the school or to the level required to secure better learning outcomes for these pupils. No targeted additional support is provided for Traveller pupils in the infant classes where the need for prevention of learning difficulties and early intervention strategies is greatest. In articulating his vision for the school, the principal has identified the inclusion of Traveller pupils as one of his priorities. As a means of realising this vision, it is recommended that the school’s policy on the education of Traveller pupils be clearly documented in the school plan. The school should liaise with the Visiting Teacher for Travellers Service (VTTS) in developing a whole-school policy for Traveller education. The policy should delineate the school’s strategy for meeting the educational welfare needs of Traveller pupils, in terms of promoting school attendance, retention and progression; ensuring equality of opportunity; and supporting inclusion and access to all areas of the curriculum. In addition, the policy should include a clearly defined role for the RTT post in accordance with the rules and regulations set out in circular 7/99.

5. CONCLUSION
The school has strengths in the following areas:

- Board of management members are highly committed to the school and fulfil their roles in relation to the maintenance of the school, the management of accounts and the provision of resources efficiently.
- The school building is bright, spacious and very well maintained and resourced both internally and externally.
- Pupils work conscientiously and achieve good standards across the curriculum.
- The principal has a clear vision for the development of the school and has put procedures in place to progress this vision. Accordingly, in the short time since his appointment, he has gained the confidence of the school community.
- Members of the in-school management team contribute diligently and effectively to the management and development of the school.
The teachers are hardworking and committed to maximising pupils’ potential.

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

- The manner in which teaching staff has been deployed by the board of management is in need of immediate attention. The appropriate levels of support teaching should be provided to pupils from minority groups in order to address their low achievement levels.
- It is advised that the school provide further opportunities for parental involvement in policy formulation.
- The school should focus on implementing a consistent handwriting policy in order that all pupils will develop a legible style. In a small number of classes, there is a need to ensure that pupils’ work is monitored more frequently.
- It is advised that the school extend the range of assessment tools in use and that assessment results be analysed more effectively to ascertain trends throughout the school.
- The school is advised to develop the model of in-class support and to extend its provision of early intervention.

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 Board of Management would like to thank the members of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills for their professionalism and for the courtesy extended to the whole school community during the course of the W.S.E.

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

The recommendations of the inspectors are currently being addressed by the Board of Management.