Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Brendan’s National School
Mullagh, Co. Galway
Uimhir rolla: 17154V

Date of inspection: 16 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION
A whole-school evaluation of St. Brendan’s 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 Science. 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
St. Brendan’s National school is located in a rural setting in the townland of Mullagh, approximately five kilometres from the village of Kilreekil in Co. Galway. The school dates from 1939 and is now the only school in the parish of Mullagh/Killoran. Since the last school report issued in 2001, many changes have occurred. As expected, pupil enrolments have decreased in line with the national trend of falling populations in farming communities. Plans to refurbish the school were brought to fruition in 2007 and a new principal was appointed from the staff in 2008. The school occupies a large site and now provides modern, spacious accommodation.

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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision
The school is under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Clonfert and its Christian ethos supports inclusiveness and equality. In keeping with its mission statement, the board of management, staff and parents seek to create a well-ordered, caring, happy and secure atmosphere where the needs of all the pupils can be identified and addressed. A strong sense of community permeates the atmosphere in the school and very beneficial links are maintained with local sporting and cultural organisations.

1.2 Board of management
The school has an active and supportive board of management which is properly constituted. The board comprises new and experienced members, the majority of whom have availed of the training provided for new boards of management. The board generally works as a unit to oversee the provision in the school. The chairperson maintains regular contact with the principal and the treasurer frequently updates the board on the school’s financial position. A computerised system is used to manage the school accounts which are certified on an annual basis. Board members regularly assist with practical matters in relation to the upkeep and development of the school premises. The board’s most recent work has encompassed the organisation of retirement functions for former staff members, the appointment of new staff, the ratification of policies and the
organisation of emergency maintenance work necessitated by freezing winter temperatures. An action plan, spanning an appropriate period, details the school’s priorities in relation to organisational, curricular and resource development.

The board is aware of its statutory obligations and complies with guidelines and regulations in relation to the length of the school day, the circulation of the school plan and the formulation of specific policies. The school issues a newsletter periodically and the board is to consider how an issue of the newsletter may be adapted to provide an annual report from the board on the operation of the school. The board is also conscious of its responsibilities in relation to safeguarding the health and safety of all those using the school premises. Fire-safety measures have recently been upgraded and guidelines in relation to hygiene and swine-flu prevention have been implemented. Discussion has commenced on the review of the school’s code of discipline.

The board pays due attention to the development of the school’s resources. Staff engagement in continuous professional development is valued and supported. Staff members attend conferences, seminars and courses, and engage with regional curriculum advisors. The school principal is currently participating in the Misneach programme for principals organised by Leadership Development for Schools and it would be of value for the Deputy Principal to engage with the service in the future. The board, in consultation with the staff, should now formulate a policy on staff development. This policy, among other things, should make reference to the manner in which teachers may be facilitated in experiencing a variety of roles in the school and in teaching at different class levels. As the school is currently in the process of upgrading its technological resources, it would also be of value to include details of local and national initiatives focussed on promoting the use of information and communication technologies in education. While a good range of teaching and learning resources is available in the school to support work in each curricular area, there is a need to ensure that all support rooms are equipped with appropriate-sized furniture and with adequate visual aids to fully support the work in literacy and numeracy. The school building and grounds are maintained to a very high standard and pupils have access to extensive play facilities and a school garden.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team comprises the principal and the deputy principal. The principal engages effectively with all the partners and relationships across the school community are positive. Daily administrative and organisational tasks are capably managed and the whole-school planning process is progressing satisfactorily. The principal is supported by the deputy principal who ably carries out a broad range of duties. Both post holders contribute significantly to the creation of a positive atmosphere in which all members of staff assume a role in developing policy and leading change. Staff meetings are regularly organised and records are maintained of agreed decisions regarding curriculum planning and implementation. There is scope now to place greater emphasis on monitoring learning outcomes, on reviewing classroom practice and on setting targets for improvement and development so that self-evaluation and review become embedded in the culture of the school. The board is advised to establish a practice of reviewing the duties attached to the posts of responsibility at regular intervals in order to ensure that the posts continue to address the changing prioritised needs of the school.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
The board of management encourages the active engagement of parents in the work of the school. The school has a parent association of long standing that is not affiliated to the National Parents Council. It is reported that there is great willingness among the parents to support and assist with activities. Working in partnership with the board, parents raise funds for specific items and help in developing the school grounds. Of late, funds have been raised for the purchase of interactive boards; trees and flower boxes have been planted; murals and playground games painted; and
fencing and basketball nets erected. Parents organise parties, provide transport to inter-school events and assist with games coaching and the swimming programme. Parents are very supportive of the school’s participation in healthy-eating initiatives and in national projects such as Green Schools and Discover Primary Science. Most recently, the association worked closely with the board to organise retirement functions. The school’s Christmas concert also provided another occasion for board members, parents, former pupils and the wider community to come together in support of the work of the school.

A number of effective strategies sustain communication with the parents and the wider community. In addition to the school newsletter, regular notes and letters are issued to the parent body and the parish bulletin is also used to highlight school activities. New parents receive an information booklet incorporating the school rules and pertinent policy statements. Parent-teacher meetings are organised once a year and parents are also welcome to meet teachers at other times. The parent representatives on the board expressed their satisfaction with the provision in the school and praised, in particular, the emphasis that is placed on promoting interest in reading and on involving the pupils in such activities as swimming, hurling, camogie, basketball and tennis.

1.5 Management of pupils
The pupils are divided equitably into two multi-grade classes. A caring, orderly atmosphere is in evidence in the school. Pupils are cognisant of school rules and are respectful towards the staff, visitors and one another. In addition to school-based activities, the pupils are provided with opportunities to participate in competitions, quizzes, sporting events and fundraising for charitable organisations. The school enjoys strong links with the local sports club and draws on the club’s resources to support the implementation of the physical education curriculum and the organisation of after-school activities. Pupils, as members of the Green School committee, are involved in decision-making and in managing the school’s recycling and energy conservation strategies. Pupils engage readily in all classroom activities and display reasonably good levels of confidence and self-esteem.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The board of management, parents and staff are involved in varying degrees in the whole-school planning process. The board engages regularly in the process but mostly in terms of ratifying draft policies which are prepared by the staff and presented at board meetings. In the interest of facilitating more active levels of participation in policy formulation, it is suggested that draft policy documents should be circulated to the board members and to the parent association prior to the board meetings at which they are to be considered. The school plan contains a range of administrative policies relevant to the context of the school. It also contains curricular policy statements that are at various stages of development. While most are well advanced, there is a need, in particular, to clarify the content to be covered at each class level and to indicate how progression is to be achieved in the context of multi-grade classes. The board is reminded that all policy statements should be signed and dated and their ratification noted in the minutes of board meetings.

All classroom teachers provide long and short-term planning and maintain records of the work covered. The quality of the long-term planning varies from curricular area to curricular area. Whereas the programme in Mathematics is very well defined at each class level, there is scope to enhance the clarity of the planning in other areas and in particular for oral language development in both English and Irish. Further refinement of short-term planning should focus on providing
clearer statements of the expected learning outcomes and of the assessment techniques to be used to measure the effectiveness of the teaching in relation to those objectives.

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

Gaeilge

Baintear leas as an gcur chuige cumarsáideach Chun na ceithre scil teanga a chur chun cinn. Eagraítear gníomhátaí cuí éisteachta ag gach rangleibhéil bunaith ar thopáifí gur spéis leis na daltaí ann. Baintear dea-úsáid as ábhair níthiúil agus pictúir tharrainnteacha chun foclóir a leathnú. Áirítear idir chluichí teanga, agallaímh réamhthéanta, drámaíocht, aithrisioireacht agus amhránaíocht i measc na ngníomhátaí cuí taitneamhacha a chuirtear ar siúl chun cumas labhrtha a chothú. Leagtar bunús tréan foclóra go luath agus de réir a chéile téann na daltaí i dtáithí ar roinnt brithrtha a úsáid. B’fhéidir a thuilleadh béime a chur ar an ngené seo den teanga agus cumas na ndaltaí chun tuairisc a labhairt ag baint úsáide as sraith d’abairtí simplí a chur chun cinn. Mar thata le sin, moltar fothóireáil a cheapadh faoi na móthóireáil teanga agus an forchéimniú ó rang go rang maidir le foclóir, gramadach agus struchtúr na cainte a léiriú go soiléir sa phlean scoile.

Irish

The communicative approach is used to develop the four language skills. Appropriate listening activities are organised at each class level based on topics which are of interest to the pupils. Good use is made of concrete materials and attractive pictures to extend vocabulary. Language games, prepared conversations, drama, recitation and song singing are among the enjoyable activities which are organised to develop oral competency. A strong vocabulary base is established early and gradually the pupils become accustomed to using some verbs. It would be of value to place more emphasis on this aspect of the language and to develop the pupils’ ability to give an account using a series of simple sentences. In support of this, it is recommended that sub-themes be formulated under the major language themes and that the progression from class
to class as regards vocabulary, grammar and language structure be clearly presented in the school plan.

Attention is directed towards reading and writing from the middle classes onwards. The pupils are initially prompted to make their own books and with the help of textbooks and workbooks they are enabled to read accurately and confidently. They are given opportunities to write news, sentences and simple stories. Some poetry and songs are taught and it is recommended that greater advantage should be derived from these aspects to provide the pupils with rich idioms of speech which they can use when engaged in writing. It would greatly benefit the work also if a richer print environment was cultivated in the school. A definite pre-reading programme should also be implemented and the pupils should be given regular opportunities to practice personal writing at an appropriate standard.

**English**

Aspects of oral language, reading and writing are beneficially linked to provide an integrated approach to the teaching of English. Pupils at each class level are provided with opportunities to converse, to enter into discussion and to pose questions as they engage in reading and writing activities. However, a more structured approach to oral language teaching is required in order to extend the pupils’ vocabulary, to enhance their understanding of the listener/speaker relationship and to improve their comprehension skills. It is recommended that a differentiated and broad programme of oral language activities be designed for each class grouping and that discrete oral language lessons are regularly timetabled. A component of this programme should seek to expose the pupils to a rich and varied repertoire of poetry at each class level.

The development of phonemic and phonological awareness is approached in a very systematic manner and pupils display a firm knowledge of the letter-sound relationships. They use a variety of cueing strategies very competently to read unfamiliar words and their grasp of onset, rime and syllabication leads to very good spelling throughout the school. Big books, class texts, library books and class novels are used appropriately to engage the pupils in reading. While most pupils read with fluency, there is scope to develop expressiveness in their reading which should in turn contribute to their comprehension of the text. It is suggested that increased emphasis should be placed on questioning, discussing and probing a variety of texts in order to enable the pupils to elicit the full meaning of the text and to enhance their higher comprehension skills.

The pupils are provided with opportunities to engage in a range of writing tasks which include comprehension exercises, functional writing and the writing of news, poetry, story, diaries, book reports, magazine articles and books for the Write-a-book project. Examples of written work are displayed attractively in the classrooms and are also compiled into class books. The pupils exhibit pride in their work and endeavour to record it neatly. There is a need, however, to review the school policy on handwriting so that all pupils may be enabled to develop a cursive style in appropriate stages.

**3.2 Mathematics**

Mainstream teachers and support teachers collaborate effectively to differentiate the teaching and learning in Mathematics. Practical activities are regularly organised and they are well paced and appropriately structured. While the language of Mathematics is clearly displayed and good use is made of available materials, there is scope to develop more maths-rich classroom environments. Items such as number lines, hundred squares and fraction walls should be permanently displayed in classrooms and support rooms. An adequate amount of basic materials for exploring aspects such as place value should also be readily accessible.
A range of engaging number rhymes, stories and songs is used to very good effect to develop understanding of numerical and spatial concepts in the junior classes. Drills and games assist the senior pupils to memorise number facts and they recall them accurately and swiftly. Pupils, in general, display a good knowledge of the concepts covered and are discerning of the practical applications of mathematics in real life situations. They use estimation strategies competently and approach problem-solving with confidence. While many pupils record their work neatly, it would be of value to agree a policy on the use of copybooks and on the manner in which problem-solving should be recorded.

3.3 Science
All strands of the Science curriculum are well developed in the school. Science tables in each classroom focus attention on the work in hand. Classroom displays pertaining to seasonal change, plant and animal life, materials, energy conservation, recycling and designing-and-making indicate that a combination of classroom activity, project work and fieldwork is employed. The general-purposes room and the school garden are regularly used to accommodate investigations. Praiseworthy emphasis is placed on establishing the pupils’ current level of reasoning as a starting point for scientific enquiry. Class discussion is ably managed and observational skills are fostered through skilful questioning and the handling of materials. It is recommended that a record of observations be maintained to assist recall and revision and to consolidate knowledge and understanding of the changes that occur over time.

A range of interesting materials is provided to facilitate collaborative work in exploring material change. Pupils also gain experience of the technological process through planning and making models to solve practical problems. Participation in the Green Schools initiative and in the Discover Primary Science project heightens the pupils’ awareness of the importance of energy conservation and of caring for the environment. The pupils display an interest in Science and engage enthusiastically in the organised activities. As a means of developing understanding, of consolidating learning and of enhancing oral communication skills, the pupils should be encouraged to summarise their methodologies and present their findings orally on a regular basis.

3.4 Assessment
The teachers employ a variety of assessment modes to monitor pupil progress and to inform planning and reporting. These include indicators, objective-based tests, teacher observations, teacher-designed topic tests, spelling tests, table tests and standardised tests in English and Mathematics. The Middle Infant Screening Test and the Non-Reading Intelligence Test are also used to assist in screening pupils for early intervention programmes and supplementary teaching. Individual files are maintained on each pupil and written progress reports are issued to parents at the end of the school year. The results of standardised tests are currently collated manually and the use of technology to assist in analysing the results should now be considered. Some discussion has occurred among the staff on the format of the school’s written reports. To inform any future review of the reporting process, it is suggested that the staff should consult the recent work carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in this regard.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
The school draws on the services of a learning-support teacher and a resource teacher, both of whom are based in the school. The learning-support teacher is shared with another school and the resource teacher also visits that same school and another school in the area. In St. Brendan’s NS, the support teachers provide supplementary teaching to individual pupils and to small groups of
pupils sharing common needs. As only a small number of the full cohort of pupils in the school fall within the criteria for selection for learning support, the teachers also provide support in the multi-grade settings by withdrawing whole-class groups for work in specific areas of the curriculum.

Individual programmes are appropriately documented for the pupils with learning difficulties and special educational needs. The programmes are informed by mainstream teacher observations, diagnostic testing, parental input and professional reports. The class-based programmes are planned in consultation with the class teachers. The support teachers establish very good rapport with their pupils and successfully motivate them to engage with interest in well structured learning activities. Praiseworthy emphasis is placed on language extension and in many instances a very good variety of strategies and approaches is used to consolidate the learning.

Further development of the supplementary support service in the school should focus on provision of early intervention in English and Mathematics and on adopting a team approach to the provision in the support cluster. The school plan contains a policy on learning support and special education needs and this should now be reviewed to incorporate the staged approach to provision and the team concept as outlined in circulars SP ED 24/03 and SP ED 02/05.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school has a committed board of management and an active parent body who very generously give of their time and skills to support the work of the school.
- The school occupies an important position in the community and benefits from the strong links it has established with local sporting and cultural organisations.
- All strands of the curriculum in the areas evaluated are being implemented to good effect.
- The pupils are very courteous and mannerly and engage in a wide range of school and after-school activities.
- Support teachers are collaborating constructively with mainstream teachers to develop the support provision in the school.

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

- There is scope to develop the school plan in order to clarify the content to be covered at each class level and to indicate how progression in each curricular area is to be achieved in the multi-grade class situation.
- Greater levels of participation in policy formulation and review should be encouraged among the board members and parent body.
- There is a need to focus attention on establishing firm practices of school self-evaluation as a means of ensuring improvement and development in the future.
- A review of the policy on learning support and special education is required to guide the operation and future development of the support services in 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.
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 acknowledge the courteous and professional approach taken by the inspector throughout the WSE process.

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

1. The Whole School Plan for Irish and English has been reviewed, placing greater emphasis on content to be covered at each class level. A handwriting programme has been implemented throughout the school.
2. Drafting of policy documents is now a collaborative process involving Board of Management, staff and parents’ representatives.
3. Teachers are continuing to attend courses to enhance development and the Board of Management in consultation with staff is in the process of drawing up a policy on staff development.
4. The policy on learning support and special education is being reviewed.
5. Agreement has been arrived at for acceptable practice regarding assessment and self-evaluation based on standardised tests.