An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Fintan’s National School
Taghmon, Co. Wexford
Uimhir rolla:17443F

Date of inspection: 25 February 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Fintan’s National School was undertaken in February 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 Music. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St. Fintan’s National School is a thirteen-teacher mixed, fully-vertical school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Ferns, situated in the village of Taghmon, Co. Wexford. The school receives additional funding and support under the Department’s Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme (DEIS). The school has a current enrolment of 191 pupils and it is projected that this enrolment will remain stable for the foreseeable future. The attendance of a minority of pupils is of concern and the school has introduced a number of strategies to improve that situation.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<tr>
<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

The schools’ vision is articulated clearly in its written mission statement. This vision focuses on celebrating the uniqueness of each child, and cherishing and challenging them in a learning environment that is both safe and attractive. During the course of the whole-school evaluation, it was evident that the school community endeavours to promote this characteristic spirit through its day-to-day activities.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and its work supports the operation of the school. Roles are defined clearly and individual board members undertake assigned responsibilities effectively. The chairperson meets with the principal regularly and is a frequent visitor to the staffroom. The board plays a role in the whole-school planning process and curriculum plans and organisational policies are considered and ratified. It is recommended that these plans and policies be formally dated and signed by the chairperson on ratification and that a
date for review be recorded. It is further recommended that the enrolment policy be reviewed to include the criteria for decision making in the event that applications for enrolment exceed the number of school places available. A regular report on the school’s finances is provided for the board. The intention to introduce the annual external certification of the school accounts, as per the requirements of the Education Act (1998), is noted and should proceed as a matter of priority. The board is commended for its role in ensuring that the school is well maintained and for the implementation of a phased programme of improvements. Positive relationships between the board and school staff, the parents’ association, the wider parent body and the local community are reported.

1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team comprises the principal, the deputy principal and two special-duties teachers. The principal is commended for her commitment to the work of the school. She is successful in cultivating a welcoming and positive school climate that is characterised by cooperative working relationships across the school community. She leads the whole-school planning process and she supports positive pupil participation and behaviour.

In fulfilling her duties, the principal is aided by the members of the in-school management team, who undertake their currently assigned duties conscientiously. It is advised that the range of these duties be reviewed to ensure that a suitable balance of responsibilities is achieved and that they adequately reflect the evolving priorities of the school. Formal contracts, detailing the duties attached to each post, should be devised and implemented. In fulfilling their duties, it is recommended that the members of the in-school management team play a more active role in leading teaching and learning on a schoolwide basis, and in monitoring the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. Specific priorities attaching to the areas of responsibility assigned to each post holder should be identified and progressed annually. Formal meetings of the in-school management team should be convened on a regular basis and written records of actions agreed should be maintained.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Positive relationships between the school, the parents’ association and the wider parent community are in evidence. Home-school links are fostered through a variety of school activities, including school concerts, religious ceremonies and sporting activities. Parents are provided with regular opportunities to discuss their children’s progress through the convening of formal and informal parent-teacher meetings. Written reports on the pupils’ progress are provided at the end of each school year.

The parents’ association plays an active and valuable role in the life of the school. It contributes to the formulation of some organisational policies and it assists in the celebration of the sacraments and other school events. The parents’ association organises a variety of fund-raising activities, it provides information packs to the parents of new pupils and it assists in the annual spring cleaning of the school. A number of parents also play an active role in the promotion of environmental awareness and care practices through their involvement in the Green Schools committee.

1.5 Management of pupils

The pupils of St. Fintan’s NS are well behaved and they cooperate with the school’s rules and code of behaviour. They are eager and motivated in their learning and they participate
enthusiastically in the range of activities provided. Positive teacher-pupil relationships are in evidence. The pupils are provided with some opportunities to take an active role in decision making, for example through their involvement in the *Green Schools* committee. In implementing its code of behaviour and initiatives to prevent bullying, the school is advised to review its present policy to reflect the more recent guidelines of the National Education Welfare Board (2008) and to incorporate the practices to promote positive behaviour that are currently being implemented in the school.

2. **Quality of School Planning**

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

Curriculum plans for all areas of the curriculum and a range of organisational plans have been devised collaboratively by the principal and the teaching staff, in consultation with the board of management. The implementation of these plans and policies is reviewed occasionally. It is recommended that a more formal approach to the development and review of curriculum plans be adopted. In so doing, a long-term plan should be devised that clearly details the priority areas of teaching and learning that are to be developed. Action plans should be devised to address each of these priorities. All curriculum plans should reflect the particular context of the school and its pupil profile more adequately and in turn provide greater direction to the teachers regarding the mediation of the curriculum at each class level.

While all teachers engage in regular long-term and short-term planning, there is considerable variation in the quality of this planning. In many instances, individual teacher planning is based predominantly on the content of the textbooks and workbooks in use. It is recommended that individual teachers’ planning should reflect the curriculum objectives for their class groupings more adequately and that suitable provision be made for differentiation in teaching and learning. Monthly progress records are maintained by most teachers and are retained centrally. It is recommended that these monthly progress records be provided by all teachers. It is further advised that these records provide an informative overview of the learning outcomes that have been achieved by the pupils. In turn, they should be reviewed formally by the in-school management team to assess the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and to evaluate the progress that is being made in addressing the school’s curriculum priorities.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with 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. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines. It is recommended that a copy of the procedures be provided to all staff (including all new staff) and that management ensure that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed.
3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

Irish

There is scope for development in the teaching and learning of Irish. While the teachers employ a variety of suitable methodologies, including paired work, games, stories and puppets, the majority of pupils speak with an absence of confidence and fluency. A whole-school plan for Irish should be implemented systematically throughout the school to ensure that the pupils get opportunities to hear and speak Irish regularly. It is recommended strongly that lessons are structured appropriately and that vocabulary, phrases and language inputs are practiced consistently. In some classes, the pupils recite a nice variety of poems and songs fluently and with enjoyment. It is recommended that the pupils in all classes learn a range of poems and songs to enhance their communication skills.

Pupils in the middle and senior classes read textbook excerpts with fluency and demonstrate understanding of what they have read. Additional reading material should be provided to afford pupils opportunities to read a wide range of literature and to further develop their reading ability. The pupils participate in functional writing activities regularly. They also engage in writing personal news, comprehension tasks and grammar exercises and, in some classes, short stories. However, overall there is too much dependency on workbook activities by way of promoting the pupils’ writing skills. It is recommended that a whole-school policy to develop the pupils’ independent writing be devised and implemented throughout the school.

English

While some praiseworthy approaches to promoting the pupils’ learning in English were in evidence in a number of classrooms, there is scope for development overall in the quality of teaching and learning. The pupils are given regular opportunities to develop their oral language skills through linkage with reading and writing activities, and through integration with other areas of the curriculum. However, provision for discrete oral language learning is only in evidence in a
small number of class settings. While the majority of pupils converse with confidence and competence across a range of topics, the absence of discrete and structured oral language provision in a significant number of classes should be addressed. In so doing, the pupils’ vocabulary store, their range of language structures and their capacity to engage with the views and opinions of others should be developed systematically. In some classes, the pupils recite a range of poems with enthusiasm and proficiency. It is advised that the pupils be provided with opportunities to learn a wide variety of poetry in all classes.

In general, reading standards are good and they reflect the range of pupil ability levels. All classrooms are suitably print-rich and have well-stocked libraries. In the junior classes, the pupils’ phonological awareness is developed purposefully and a multi-strategy approach to develop the pupils’ reading skills is in evidence throughout the school. In some classes, differentiated reading groups have been established, which accommodate the pupils’ differing abilities and needs effectively. This practice should be extended on a schoolwide basis. There is an emphasis on the development of the pupils’ personal reading through shared-reading initiatives, the provision of supplementary readers and close liaison with the county library. It is recommended that the use of the class novel be further exploited in middle and senior classes, that written media be examined on a regular basis and that a more co-ordinated approach to the implementation of shared-reading initiatives be implemented.

The pupils engage in a variety of writing activities and there is an appropriate emphasis on the development of their functional writing skills. Samples of the pupils’ work across a variety of writing genres are displayed attractively in the classrooms. In order to develop the pupils’ personal writing competence fully, it is recommended that a process approach to writing be implemented at a whole-school level. In so doing, all pupils should be provided with regular exposure to the breadth of writing genres. It is strongly recommended that the significant use of commercially produced workbooks to direct the pupils’ independent writing should be discontinued.

3.2 Mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good and a broad and balanced programme is delivered. Each classroom provides a mathematics-rich environment, with relevant number facts and teaching charts on display. The teachers promote the use of suitable mathematical language consistently throughout the school. A variety of teaching approaches is employed including whole-class teaching, group-based activities and pair work. Well-structured talk and discussion and skilful teacher questioning facilitate the pupils’ understanding of the mathematical concepts being taught. Suitable practical and written activities, rhymes, songs, games and information and communication technology (ICT) programmes are used to consolidate learning in a manner that stimulates the pupils’ enjoyment and encourages a positive attitude to Mathematics. The work of the pupils is monitored regularly by the teachers and they are provided with useful feedback. In the further development of Mathematics, a renewed emphasis on the development of the pupils’ problem-solving skills should be promoted on a schoolwide basis, in tandem with the improvement of whole-school approaches to the development of mental mathematics and tables. A range of mathematical manipulatives is available to support teaching and learning and it is advised that this store of materials continue to be augmented as financial resources permit.
3.3 Music

The standard of teaching and learning in Music is commended. The teachers implement a broad programme of musical activities, which includes listening and responding, performing and composing. Opportunities for integration with other areas of the curriculum are exploited usefully. The musical proficiency of particular teachers is employed productively to support the implementation of the music programme. The pupils demonstrate high levels of interest in and enthusiasm for the learning activities provided. The pupils sing a wide range of songs in English and Irish tunefully. A range of musical elements is addressed purposefully in lessons and the pupils display a keen ability to engage in a variety of rhythmic activities. The quality of the pupils’ recorder playing is praised as is the development of their musical literacy skills. The school choir, which involves pupils from fourth to sixth classes, performs for liturgical services and a variety of school events. A school musical, involving all the pupils in the school, is organised annually and it serves as an important occasion for parents and for members of the wider school community.

3.4 Assessment

A variety of assessment modes is used to assess the progress of individual pupils. These approaches include teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, checklists and the monitoring of the pupils’ written work. Standardised assessment in English and Mathematics are administered annually from first to sixth classes. This is complemented by the use of screening assessment in senior infants. In order to respond to the wide range of pupil abilities in evidence in each class setting, it is recommended that a more systematic, whole-school approach to assessment be adopted. This should include the employment of a more diverse range of assessment modes at each class level and the methodical use of assessment outcomes to inform planning, teaching and differentiation.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

A formal policy has been devised to guide the school’s provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). A number of pupils of Irish ethnic minorities attend the school and the school’s provision for Traveller pupils with SEN is incorporated into its overall SEN policy and practices. It is recommended that the school’s SEN policy and practices be augmented to incorporate formally the staged approach to assessment, identification and programme planning, as per the provisions of Circular 02/05. Currently, pupils with SEN are withdrawn from their mainstream classrooms to receive supplementary teaching in literacy and/or numeracy. This results in some pupils being withdrawn from their classrooms for extended periods of time, and in some instances to more than one support teacher. It is recommended that opportunities for the pupils to learn within the context of their peers be maximised. In order to achieve this goal, current provision should be extended to incorporate well-structured prevention, early intervention, team-teaching and in-class support measures. Supplementary teaching for pupils with SEN is provided by a wide range of personnel. In deploying personnel resources, it is recommended that the school identify all the pupils in need of supplementary teaching and that a team approach to the structuring and implementation of interventions be adopted. It is further advised that an SEN coordinator be appointed to guide the implementation of provision.
Individualised programmes of learning have been prepared for the pupils in receipt of supplementary teaching. The use of a wider range of diagnostic assessment tools is advised to isolate the specific learning challenges being experienced by individual pupils and to aid in subsequent programme planning and implementation. In support-teaching contexts, teacher-pupil interactions are encouraging and supportive and they serve to build the pupils’ self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities. The pupils engage purposefully in the range of learning activities provided. Progress in the learning outcomes being achieved by the pupils is in evidence. The school is commended for the provision of a good range of resources to aid the pupils’ learning, including the suitable use of ICT in some settings. The school employs two special needs assistants who make an important contribution to the pupils’ learning in their respective classes under the guidance of the class teachers.

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

As part of the school’s participation in the Department’s DEIS programme, it is a member of a rural schools’ coordination service. The intended purpose of this initiative is to establish partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of the pupils’ learning. The personnel resource for this intervention is currently deployed solely to provide support for pupils with SEN. In light of the number of personnel engaged in supplementary teaching, it is recommended that personnel be assigned on a whole-time basis to engaging with and supporting families. This should include home visitation; addressing the school’s literacy, numeracy and pupil attendance priorities; supporting pupil induction to primary school and transfer to post-primary school; and working directly with parents to develop their capacity to support their children’s education.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is characterised by its positive school climate and co-operative working relationships are in evidence across the school community.
- The board of management and the parents’ association give generously of their time and skills and are actively supportive of the work of the school.
- The principal and staff are committed to their work and to the welfare of their pupils.
- The pupils are well behaved, co-operative and they participate enthusiastically in the range of school activities.

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

- The members of the in-school management team should play a more active role in leading teaching and learning on a schoolwide basis, and in monitoring the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.
- The whole-school planning process should be used more effectively to provide greater direction to the teachers regarding the mediation of the curriculum at each class level.
- The pupils’ oral competence in Irish should be developed systemically throughout the school.
In English, the absence of discrete and structured oral language provision in a significant number of classes should be addressed and the pupils should be exposed regularly to the breadth of writing genres while using a process approach to writing.

Provision for pupils with special educational needs should be extended to incorporate well-structured prevention, early intervention, team-teaching and in-class support measures.

A range of home-school initiatives should be implemented to engage directly with parents to develop their capacity to support their children’s education.

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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The school would like to thank the inspectors for their courtesy, encouragement and advice 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

- The BOM has already put in place procedures to ensure that accounts will now be certified on an annual basis.

- The in-school management roles have been revised in accordance with Department guidelines and formal contracts detailing the duties attached to each post are being drawn up. The in-school management team plan to meet regularly and to record minutes with a view to developing action plans and ensuring that these are implemented.

- Following an in-service seminar on Team Teaching (attended by all our staff members) the staff have started using in-class support with the learning support teachers. This enables the learning support teacher to support the class teacher in working with the children in the natural class environment and thus enhancing the differentiating teaching process.