

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Saint Catherine's Infant School
Cabra, Dublin 7
Uimhir rolla: 17466R**

Date of inspection: 19 November 2009



WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Catherine's Infant School was undertaken in November 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in English, Mathematics and History. The board of management 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 Catherine's Infant School is a co-educational school under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin which caters for pupils in infant classes and first class. The school building is shared with a senior girls' school. The school participates in a number of programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills and is included in Band One of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion.

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

	Number
Pupils enrolled in the school	141
Mainstream classes in the school	7
Teachers on the school staff	11
Mainstream class teachers	7
Teachers working in support roles	3.5
Special needs assistants	1 (12.5 hrs)

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The school was under the trusteeship of the Dominican Order from its foundation in 1945 until 2006, when it transferred to the St Laurence O'Toole Trust in the Archdiocese of Dublin. While emphasising its Catholic ethos, the school aims to create an inclusive educational environment in which the full and harmonious development of all pupils is fostered. The board of management and staff endeavour to make the experience of school happy and beneficial for all pupils.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management provides focused and effective leadership to the school. The board meets each month and detailed minutes are kept of these meetings. Responsibilities are shared among board members, who hold a strong vision of service to the community. The school's financial affairs are managed prudently. The treasurer presents a report at each board meeting and the school accounts are certified annually.

The board plays a strong role in the development of the school's organisational and curricular policies. The school has developed a full range of policies which are reviewed on a cyclical basis. Guided by its commitment to nurturing a spirit of collaboration among all members of the school community, the board ensures that all resources are utilised effectively for the benefit of pupils.

1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team is led purposefully by the principal who displays and shares her vision for the school through her committed involvement in all aspects of school life. She cultivates a strong culture of reflection and self-evaluation and maintains a focus on pedagogy to improve learning outcomes for pupils. She encourages teachers to reflect on classroom practices and to work collaboratively in the introduction and development of effective teaching methodologies. Her efforts to ensure that high-quality resources are available to support curriculum delivery in each classroom and in each support setting are very successful.

The principal is supported in her work by the deputy principal and two special duties teachers. Together they form a conscientious and dedicated in-school management team. This team works in a spirit of collaboration and willingness to share leadership roles in organisational and curricular areas. Duties are reviewed at annual review meetings and are revised in light of the changing needs of the school.

1.4 Management of resources

The board of management is commended for the manner in which the school building is maintained. The school is a clean, safe and stimulating learning environment for pupils. The caretaker carries out her duties conscientiously and the secretary provides valuable administrative support to the principal and staff. A special needs assistant has recently been appointed. All members of the ancillary staff play an important and valued role in the life of the school.

Appropriate resources are accessed to support curriculum delivery. These resources are allocated appropriately to meet the learning needs of pupils. Regular review by the staff identifies future resource needs. Department grants, including funding provided through the DEIS programme, are utilised effectively to maintain the school building and to provide materials to support teaching and learning. Pupils' work is celebrated in the varied displays along the corridors and in classrooms.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The school's parents' association has recently been reformed and it has not applied for affiliation to the National Parents' Council (Primary). It is recommended that this be done as soon as possible. Parents play an active role in the school and are well informed of school activities. They are supportive of the work of the board of management, of the principal and of teachers. They are consulted when school policies are being drafted or revised.

Parents' representatives express satisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication between school and home. They commend the welcoming open-door policy of the school, which ensures that parents' concerns are addressed promptly and effectively.

1.6 Management of pupils

The management of pupils is very good throughout the school. High expectations are set for pupils from the time of their enrolment. All teachers and other staff members model respectful ways of dealing with other people. They are alert to opportunities to praise good behaviour and effort by pupils. It is clear that this school is a place where pupils are respected, encouraged and well cared for.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of whole-school planning is very good. Collaborative planning practices are well established in the school. The board of management, parents and teaching staff all play important roles in the whole-school planning process. Facilitators from the Primary Professional Development Service (PPDS) have also been invited to advise staff in the formulation of curricular policy. An extensive range of organisational and curricular policies is in place. These policies are reviewed regularly in order to ensure that they remain relevant to the evolving needs of the school and of pupils. Plans are in place for each area of the curriculum. Plans for English, Mathematics and History are comprehensive and appropriate. They reflect the structure of the *Primary School Curriculum (1999)* and they show how it is to be implemented in the school.

The quality of classroom planning is very good. A consistent approach to planning has been adopted by all teachers, who provide detailed long-term and short-term schemes of work for each subject area. There is ample evidence of the sharing of good practice among teachers in both mainstream and support settings. All teachers use an appropriate range of stimulating materials in the presentation of lessons and they provide suitable resources for pupils to enable them to engage in a well-planned range of hands-on learning activities.

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 English

The standard of teaching and learning in English is very good. Oral language development is integrated with other communication skills and is embedded in content that is meaningful for the pupils. There is a structured, school-wide programme for the development of vocabulary with a focus on the teaching of naming words in junior infants, the development of adjectives in senior infants and the introduction of prepositions and conjunctions in first class. Vocabulary is further enhanced through purposeful listening and focused questioning and the use of a variety of methodologies. Listening skills are modelled very effectively by the staff and pupils are taught to identify the behaviours associated with good listening. The skilful use of predictive exercises, inferential activities and rhyming exercises during storytelling greatly enhances participation and learning. The pupils' experience of poetry is very positive. They are exposed to a variety of rhymes, nursery rhymes and jingles appropriate to their age and they recite a wide range of verse with enthusiasm and enjoyment.

The school library is extremely well-stocked with a selection of appropriate books which are attractively displayed and easily accessible. Story sacks, which have been developed by the

home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinators, help to bring stories to life for the pupils and their parents. The school provides a print-rich environment both on corridors and in classrooms. Classrooms are organised to facilitate interaction between the pupils and books while developing their curiosity about print. Each room has a library corner which is attractive and comfortable. Big books are used effectively to develop concepts about books as well as an understanding of the text. The pupils' rich experience of oral language activities, combined with the consistent, systematic and school-wide approach to the teaching of phonological awareness, enables them to quickly gain the ability to decode text, associating letters with sounds. Pupils appear to make impressive progress with their reading. They read aloud confidently, have a good sight vocabulary, can carry out word-building exercises and are skilled in word-identification strategies and in undertaking onset and rime tasks.

The school-wide language-rich environment provides an excellent basis for encouraging writing. The implementation of the First Steps Writing Programme ensures that writing is introduced in meaningful contexts and that it is taught in a structured and systematic manner. Careful preparation and coordination ensures that the pupils experience writing in several genres. Samples of writing are attractively displayed around the school. By first class, pupils form clearly-shaped letters with suitable gaps between words. Most write in sentences using full stops and capital letters correctly. The most-able pupils start to develop their ideas into simple sentences, using more adventurous words for effect. The teachers model the thought processes involved in the writing process. Extra support is provided by the learning-support team for those who need help with handwriting. These pupils attend a handwriting group for a short period and focus is placed on developing their fine motor skills.

3.2 Mathematics

The teaching of Mathematics is of a very high standard. Very focused and targeted whole-school planning for Mathematics has a very positive impact on the quality of Mathematics teaching through the school. There is a strong emphasis on the use of an activity based, hands-on approach to the teaching of Mathematics. A comprehensive range of learning activities is provided for each curricular strand and a commendable array of resources is supplied. Each classroom has a dedicated area for Mathematics and displays include relevant mathematical charts and posters. Team teaching is used very effectively in infant classes and there are plans to extend this practice to all classes. The *Number Worlds Programme* is used extensively in lessons. Time is used very efficiently and pupils are focused and on task throughout lessons.

All pupils access a wide variety of mathematical games and activities in small groups under the careful supervision of mainstream and support teachers. They engage in stimulating and purposeful activities and they use a wide variety of concrete materials to explore mathematical concepts. A consistent school-wide approach to the teaching of mathematical language is followed. The engagement by teachers in professional development courses around the teaching of Mathematics also has a positive effect on pupils' attainment levels. All teachers in first class have trained in using Maths Recovery strategies in mainstream settings and it is evident that this training has a positive impact on the quality of lessons. Maths Recovery was introduced to the school in the current school year and it enables additional intensive support to be provided to pupils who require it.

During lessons teachers ensure that tasks are set at suitable levels for pupils. Tasks are differentiated where appropriate. Commendable use is made of information technology for the teaching of Mathematics. Software is chosen to provide pupils with opportunities to consolidate mathematical concepts and to track individual progress in Mathematics. Teachers use questioning very well to evaluate the extent to which pupils understand concepts covered during lessons.

Pupils have frequent opportunities to talk in small groups as they work together on well-structured learning activities.

3.3 History

The teaching and learning in History is very good. Teachers achieve an excellent balance between the treatment of content and the development of the range of historical skills. The programme is appropriate to the abilities and interests of the pupils and much of the learning takes place through the use of well-chosen and well-organised integrated themes or topics. Pupils' historical work begins with their own past and that of their families and community and they have opportunities to compare life in the recent past with life as it is now, through talking and writing about the personal experiences of their family members. They have collected oral evidence from their parents and grandparents which makes the past real for them and helps develop their sense of time. Good use is made of timelines and family trees to contextualize topics and to develop chronological vocabulary and understanding.

The use of interactive whiteboards provides opportunities for pupils to sequence events, pictures and objects and to further contribute to the development of chronological awareness. History is also explored through the use of a range of artefacts and through effective discussions and questioning. Opportunities are provided for pupils to handle, observe and examine objects from different historical periods. Stories and rhymes are used very effectively to allow pupils to empathise with the feelings and circumstances of the characters portrayed.

3.4 Assessment

A very broad range of assessment tools is used perceptively throughout the school to monitor pupils' progress. Assessment modes used include suitable screening and diagnostic tests. Of particular note is the high quality of the early screening test devised by the teachers. This allows pupils learning strengths and needs to be identified from the time of their enrolment in junior infants. The quality of record-keeping and reporting is excellent. Each child is tracked in literacy and numeracy and an individual folder of each pupil's test results is maintained throughout their time in school. Pupil records are stored securely and each teacher has copies of all relevant records for pupils with whom they work. Test results feed into improving practice. Thoughtful analysis of results informs planning for teaching in mainstream and support settings. The expert use of assessment to guide provision for pupils ensures that the progress of all pupils is monitored very closely and that suitable supports are put in place promptly for pupils who require them.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

The learning support team consists of two full-time teachers and one part-time resource teacher. These teachers work collaboratively with each other and with mainstream teachers in the well-coordinated delivery of support in both literacy and numeracy. The support provided for pupils with special educational needs is based on comprehensive planning targeted for each pupil. The principal, mainstream teachers and parents are all involved in devising individual plans for pupils and all have clearly defined roles in the process. Where appropriate, external agencies such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provide advice which is incorporated into individual plans. Support teachers meet each week to discuss pupils' progress and to plan appropriate interventions for pupils. Minutes are kept of these meetings and decisions taken are recorded.

Each teacher prepares detailed schemes of work and keeps daily records of work completed. Lessons incorporate a suitable range of carefully planned learning activities designed to address areas of additional need. In addition to the well-structured individual and group support provided to pupils on a withdrawal basis, very commendable team teaching is undertaken in mainstream classes in order to provide intensive support in Mathematics. While this demands high levels of co-ordination among teachers, the staff implements it with great success. It is commendable that the school now plans to extend the use of this successful approach to support the development of literacy. This represents an excellent example of how review and self-evaluation can be utilised by the teaching staff to continually improve the quality of learning experiences provided to pupils.

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

The school has been involved in the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme for eleven years. Two HSCL co-ordinators work in the school and in two other local schools. Policy is developed in conjunction with parents and with the principals of the three schools. The co-ordinators meet with the principals on a fortnightly basis. A percentage of the DEIS budget is made available to run the HSCL scheme. Courses are provided regularly for parents, the most popular being computer courses and flower arranging classes. Uptake by parents is good as the success of the courses spreads by word of mouth. An afternoon club is provided for pupils in the infant school once a week. The scheme also provides a toy library for pupils. The co-ordinators report a good relationship with the local committee and they liaise with other agencies in the community, including the An Garda Síochána, the fire service, the dentist and with local community leaders.

The local School Completion Programme (SCP) covers six primary and one post-primary school in Cabra, and is co-ordinated by a speech and language therapist. All persons employed to deliver psychological and therapeutic services in SCP Cabra are qualified at least to master's degree level and are registered with relevant professional bodies in Ireland. The strategic plan covers three strands: literacy and language support; therapeutic supports, including art therapy; and extra-curricular activities. Pupils are selected for support on the referral of the principal and teachers. Interventions are tailored to meet the needs of pupils. The programme is reviewed annually through the use of questionnaires with older pupils and focus groups with younger pupils. Feedback from teachers and parents also informs planning for the programme.

One full-time teacher provides support for pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL). This teacher works alongside the learning-support team and mainstream class teachers in order to support pupils in an inclusive environment. Support is provided through a combination of withdrawal and in-class work. Planning is specific and appropriate and is augmented with high-quality teacher-designed resources which are used very successfully to support pupils in the acquisition and use of language. There is evidence of frequent communication between the EAL teacher and mainstream class teachers in order to ensure continuity between the work done in the two settings. The EAL room is bright and attractive and the colourful displays are relevant and supportive. The *Primary School Assessment Kit* is used to assess pupils' levels of language competence. Pupil profiles are maintained for all pupils in receipt of EAL support.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The commitment and dedication of the board of management to the development of the school are highly commended.
- The principal is an empowering, instructional leader who demonstrates excellent organisational skills and a clear vision for the school; she has earned the confidence of the whole school community.
- The in-school management team provides strong, effective and perceptive school leadership.
- The quality of the teaching in mainstream classes throughout the school is very good and it is enhanced by the generous sharing of good practice among teachers.
- The members of the special education team cater expertly for the pupils in their care, swiftly identifying learning needs and responding appropriately and practically.
- Learning activities in mainstream and support settings are well differentiated to match pupils' learning needs and abilities.
- The supports provided through a range of Department initiatives to promote educational inclusion are utilised in an effective and targeted manner.
- The pupils are well-behaved and are open, enthusiastic learners.
- Teachers are committed to continuing professional development and to the sharing of skills and expertise with colleagues.

There are no key recommendations to further improve the quality of education provided by the school.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and the board of management where the draft findings 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 of St. Catherine's Infant School is absolutely delighted but not surprised by this outstanding report.

The report reflects the enormous amount of work, over and above the call of duty, performed by the entire school community.

The Principal and staff must be congratulated on the report's wholehearted endorsement of their dedicated work and commitment to the development of the school and of its pupils. It is an acknowledgement of the thousands of hours spent by teachers, outside pupil contact time, on individual and collaborative planning.

We also wish to acknowledge the huge contribution made by a number of people who work tirelessly, on a voluntary basis, on behalf of our pupils.

Finally, we are truly grateful to the Department of Education and Skills for providing us with: additional teachers to facilitate small class sizes; professional development in approaches such as Maths Recovery and First Steps; and DEIS funding for high quality classroom resources. It is very gratifying that we have succeeded in harnessing these opportunities to provide an optimum school experience for our pupils.

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

While the report indicates that it has no recommendations to further improve the quality of education provided by the school, the DES and the Trustees of the school may be assured that the Board of Management, the Principal and Staff will continue to strive for further development in the interest of the whole school community.