Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Rathbarry National School
Clonakilty, County Cork
Uimhir rolla: 17715M

Date of inspection: 24 September 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh was undertaken in September 2009. 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, 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

Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh is one of two schools in the parish of Ardfield and Rathbarry in West Cork. It is a co-educational, rural two-teacher parish school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. The school serves a local community and enjoys high levels of local support. School statistics indicate steady enrolment in recent years. Pupil attendance data indicate high levels of attendance. The school implements effective strategies with regard to attendance in accordance with National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) and Departmental guidelines and best practice.

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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<tbody>
<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 mission statement of Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh emphasises religious tolerance, mutual respect, the holistic development of all pupils, partnership and professionalism as key aspects of local educational provision.

1.2 Board of management

The school’s board of management is properly constituted and discharges its duties and responsibilities in an effective manner. Individual members bring a wide range of skills, experience and expertise to the board and they work efficiently as a unit in support of agreed school objectives. The school building, which dates back to 1950, is in excellent condition and school grounds are attractively maintained. High levels of investment in appropriate resources, in support of teaching and learning across the curriculum, were noted at the time of the whole-
school evaluation. To date one interactive whiteboard has been installed in the school with a view to evaluating its effectiveness as a teaching resource.

The daily practices and routines of the school indicated satisfactory levels of compliance with current legislation and with departmental regulations with regard to the length of the school year, the school day, the allocation of teachers, class size and the retention of pupils.

1.3 In-school management

Since her appointment in 2001 the principal of Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh has played a central role in the effective leadership and management of the local school community. Excellent relationships with the board, parents, staff and the wider school community have been established. High levels of mutual respect and support were evident at all levels within the school community. Within the unique context of the school the principal combines her teaching and administrative roles effectively and ensures that the educational needs of the pupils are central to the decision making processes. In addition, she has played a key role in the development of a positive school climate which facilitates partnership and promotes school improvement in support of high standards across a broad range of activities. She is ably supported by her permanent mainstream colleague who holds a special duties post in line with agreed departmental procedures. Assigned duties have been agreed and are carried out capably and efficiently. A positive team focus was in evidence at the time of the external evaluation. Given the nature of the school, in-school management is facilitated by daily dialogue and a whole-school approach to decision making. All full-time and part-time staff work in a collaborative manner in the best interests of the pupils and the school community and show a willingness to review and adjust practices and procedures in line with changing circumstances and emerging school priorities.

1.4 Management of resources

The board employs two full-time mainstream teachers and a part-time resource teacher (3.5 hours per week). Five hours of additional part-time support, under the general allocation model, are provided by a shared learning-support teacher who is based in a nearby school. The school teaching staff are committed to continuous professional development through regular attendance at available courses and by engagement with the local area personnel of the professional development service for teachers in the primary sector. Given the current school enrolment the school staff structure (two mainstream classes) does not easily allow for a staff rotation policy which would afford individual teachers the opportunity to experience the full variety of classes and contexts. This is facilitated internally by a collaborative approach which allows for the sharing of curricular responsibilities between mainstream class teachers in key curricular areas. This collaborative approach might be further extended to include additional curricular areas and all teaching staff members.

A part-time secretary provides essential administrative support to the principal and a part-time caretaker/cleaner is employed to ensure that levels of maintenance and hygiene are of the required standard. The core work of the school in a range of curricular areas is further enhanced by a number of external tutors (tin whistle, drama, art education and Physical Education) who are employed by the board through funds made available by the school’s Parents’ Association. Their work is planned collaboratively to support agreed curricular objectives. Other external visitors who support the work of the school, at no cost to the school community, include a rugby coach, a lighthouse keeper, a lace maker and an historian.
Adequate standards of accommodation were in evidence and a high level of compliance with health and safety legislation existed at the time of the evaluation. The maintenance of existing accommodation and the range of resource provision in support of the curricular objectives are a testament to the efficiency and commitment of successive boards. The school provides a safe, well-maintained and child friendly environment as well as a suitable environment for teaching and learning. However, given the steady enrolment, it is advised that the board consider developing a strategic plan to address the medium and long term accommodation needs of the school.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Home-school-community relationships were exemplary at the time of the external evaluation of the school. Management and staff collaborate purposefully to facilitate genuine partnership and a strong sense of community identity was evident. The board and the parents’ association expressed high levels of satisfaction with the educational provision in the school, with the quality of teaching, and with the breadth and balance of the curriculum provided. Parents are encouraged to be active in their children’s education. Parents expressed satisfaction with regard to the format and frequency of information pertaining to their children’s attainment and with the frequency of informal and formal parent-teacher interactions.

1.6 Management of pupils

Pupils in Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh are courteous and well behaved. They display a sense of pride in their school community. Good relationships between teachers and pupils exist in and out of the classroom. Age-appropriate teaching methodologies and the consistent use of praise and positive reinforcement result in high standards of behaviour. The growth in the self-esteem of pupils is facilitated by consistency and positive approaches with regard to internal school practices and routines and is reinforced by extra-curricular school and community activities. Visitors to the school are made feel welcome by management, staff, parents and pupils.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of whole-school planning is very good in Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh and a comprehensive range of appropriate curricular and administrative documentation informs the work of the school. These have been developed collaboratively, are subject to regular review and guide individual teacher preparation. Whole-school planning has been a positive factor in the development of effective individual teacher preparation.

Classroom planning is linked to the curricular strands and strand units and is consistent with whole-school planning. Detailed yearly schemes of work are drawn up and the staff have adopted common fortnightly planning templates. Teachers’ planning, suitable teaching methods, the provision of appropriate resources and realistic teacher expectations, resulting from effective use of assessment for learning, are all positive factors in the teaching and learning process. In-class work was well ordered and purposeful and suitable opportunities were provided for the development of the key skills of communication, the development of language across the curriculum and the application of number. All classroom activity had a suitable task orientation consistent with the aims and objectives of whole school and classroom planning.
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 (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

Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh provides a print rich and visually attractive environment for learning. The school corridors, classrooms and all other available spaces are decorated attractively with samples of children’s written work, school projects and photographic records of major school milestones or achievements. A wide range of appropriate reading material is available and the importance of literacy skills as a cornerstone of learning is well established in whole-school planning and in the routines and practices of the school. The teaching of receptive and expressive oral skills is prioritised. Oral development is emphasised and social communication skills are developed consistently across the different age-groups. Phonological and phonemic awareness is systematically developed throughout the school. Word games, phonics games, matching activities and flashcards are very effectively used, particularly in junior classes. Language is a key factor linking all curricular areas. Imaginative and engaging use of story was observed in a number of classes and print-rich environments stimulate creativity and interest. Games and drama are used frequently to enhance language development.

Class readers are supplemented by a broad range of additional reading material in the form of class libraries. Silent reading, shared reading, peer tutoring, and book week are among the many strategies used by teachers to encourage and promote reading. Newspaper articles, archival material and class novels are used as reading material to good effect. Writing and handwriting are given appropriate attention in the school. Much effort is expended to ensure that pupils acquire a fluent cursive style and written work is presented neatly by pupils. Pre-writing skills, proper pencil grip and correct letter formation are central to this work. Pupils write in a variety of genres and appropriate attention is paid to the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Standardised tests results (Micra-T and Drumcondra tests) presented for analysis during the course of the whole-school evaluation indicate appropriate levels of achievement in reading in the school.
3.2 Mathematics

The quality of mathematics teaching observed during the course of the whole-school evaluation was high. The pupils demonstrated very good levels of understanding with regard to basic concepts and adequate mastery of the relevant strands and strand units of the mathematics curriculum. Age-appropriate teaching methodologies are used and a comprehensive range of equipment and mathematical aids are available in all classes. Basic mathematical activities, such as matching, classifying, comparing, ordering, and recognition of numbers and shapes, are covered comprehensively in infant classes. Pupils’ skills of reasoning, estimating, predicting, calculating and problem-solving are extended developmentally in middle and senior classes. Understanding of mathematical concepts is consistently developed in all classes through the effective use of concrete resources and meaningful discussion. There was a significant and appropriate emphasis on task completion through active involvement by pupils in the context of mathematics education. Appropriate emphasis was also placed on the language of mathematics and on problem solving throughout the school.

Whole-school planning for mathematics emphasised consistency of approach and standardisation of procedures and processes through the effective use of teacher guided discovery methods. Results of standardised testing (Sigma-T tests) indicate achievement in mathematics commensurate with age throughout the school.

3.3 History

The effective teaching of History is a significant strength in Scoil Náisiúnta Rath a’ Bharraigh. It is guided by a comprehensive school plan which is consistent with the principles of the Primary School Curriculum. Teachers display imagination, creativity and enthusiasm in guiding an appropriate range of learning opportunities in history. There is a commendable emphasis on local history, on active learning methodologies and on an integrated approach to history. Time lines are used to good effect and pupils are given appropriate opportunity to develop historical and investigative skills. Locally based cross-curricular projects are regularly undertaken and are displayed with pride in the school. Whole-school planning promotes community involvement, makes appropriate use of local visitors and experts, encourages active methodologies such as field trips and project work and facilitates teaching and learning on a whole school basis.

History is taught effectively in all classes and includes a suitable emphasis on both content and skills. Children are given ample opportunity to work as historians and observed lessons were lively and interesting with a cross-curricular and investigative focus. Pupil project work was linked to their locality and they displayed a very good level of knowledge with regard to the their local environment. Community resources and artefacts were available which generated a lively interest in history and allowed pupils develop a concrete sense of their past from a community perspective.

The pupils’ engagement in the History lessons observed was impressive and the focus on history as a whole-school, community-based activity was a notable feature of the lessons. The lack of dependence on textbooks and their use as reference material or to facilitate further investigation where appropriate was a commendable aspect of the history programme in the school.
3.4 Assessment
A wide range of assessment modes is used to facilitate learning in the school. Teacher observation, frequent dialogue, collaborative planning, diagnostic testing and the appropriate use of standardised test data were observed to be effective aspects of assessment practice. Meticulous record-keeping is the norm and test results are shared with parents and guardians as standard procedure in line with departmental guidelines and best practice. School assessment practices impact positively on teaching and learning and there is continuity and consistency in the support for pupils with additional educational needs.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Pupils with special educational needs are afforded appropriate priority within the constraints of available resources. Five hours are available under the general allocation model and an additional three-and-a-half hours’ resource teaching is available. These services are provided by two additional part-time staff members. Their interventions are developed collaboratively and guided by appropriate planning, record keeping and dialogue with relevant partners. Emphasis is placed on individual and occasional group withdrawal methods as the key methodology. Both teachers work effectively in support of their current cohort of pupils. In order to further develop and integrate the work of the special educational needs (SEN) team it would worthwhile to engage in more whole-class teaching or in-class support activities.

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

Dedicated provision for pupils from disadvantaged, minority or other groups was not required in the school at the time of the evaluation.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is a well-maintained, well-ordered, safe, attractive child-friendly environment in which the core principles of the Primary School Curriculum are firmly embedded.
- The parents and local community are actively and enthusiastically involved in the daily work of the school at pastoral, organisational and curricular levels.
- The board of management are proactive and professional in their role and have managed, through their collective expertise, to create a strong sense of community in support of the agreed objectives of the school.
- Effective whole-school planning underpins the work of the school community.
- The school has a dedicated and professional teaching staff who work diligently, employ age-appropriate teaching methods and strive to achieve high standards.
- The school principal is a facilitative leader who recognises the value of teamwork and partnership and who is proactive in pursuit of these principles.
- The pupils of the school are provided with a broad range of learning opportunities and general standards of educational achievement in literacy and numeracy conform to national standards.
The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

- It is recommended that the school positively exploit the opportunities for collaborative teaching methodologies that exist within the multi-class context. This would enable all teachers, including part-time teachers, to have opportunities to teach in a wider range of individual class contexts.
- It is recommended that the SEN team engages in a wider range of methodologies that might include whole-class teaching or in-class support as possible strategies.
- It is recommended that the board of management draw up a strategic plan to address the medium and long term accommodation needs of 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.

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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 Board of Management welcomes the content and findings of the W.S.E. report.

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 Board of Management is actively drawing up a strategic plan addressing the medium and long term accommodation needs of the school.