Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Donard National School
Donard, County Wicklow
Uimhir rolla: 17920N

Date of inspection: 11 May 2011
1. Introduction

Donard National School, County Wicklow, is a co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. The 122 pupils are taught in multi-grade classes. The pupils’ attendance levels are excellent. The school is currently working towards its fourth green flag. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the main strengths of the work of the school:

- Excellent support is provided to the school by the board of management, the parents and the wider community.

- The principal, who manages the school competently, facilitates very good communication, positive staff relations and a caring school atmosphere.

- The teaching of the pupils’ early-reading skills is effective.

- There are very good supports for pupils with special educational needs.

- The teachers are effective communicators and use good quality resources during appropriately-structured lessons.

- The school building and its grounds are in excellent order and provide a stimulating centre for learning.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Curriculum plans should fully reflect the school context and inform all aspects of teaching and learning at each class level.

- It is recommended that all teachers engage in more systematic assessment and recording of pupils’ learning across curriculum areas and use these records to inform their objectives-based, short-term planning.

- The curriculum development roles of the in-school management team should be enhanced in line with the school’s priority areas for development.

- Extended provision for group work and guided-discovery learning is recommended, with particular emphasis on providing suitably-challenging learning activities for more able pupils.

- A review of the teaching of Mathematics with regard to the strand of measures, oral mathematics, problem solving and use of the environment is recommended.
3. Quality of School Management

- The highly-supportive and competent board of management ensures that the school is very well resourced and that the building and its grounds are maintained to a very high standard.

- The principal, who has teaching duties, displays very good organisational and management skills. She is very supportive of the staff, welcoming of parents and fosters a caring and positive school climate. In questionnaires, all parents state that the school has a good reputation and most agree that it is well run and welcoming. The teachers with posts of responsibility ably assist the principal and carry out their assigned duties very well. It is recommended that the curriculum leadership roles of the in-school management team be enhanced in line with the school’s prioritised areas for development.

- The management of resources is very good. The school is well equipped with a wide variety of appropriate teaching resources. All ancillary staff members carry out their work with commitment and in a competent manner. Staff mobility within mainstream classrooms should be reviewed to ensure that teachers experience a range of class levels and further develop their pedagogical skills.

- There is very good management of relations and communications with the school community. There are appropriate formal and informal communication structures. These include regular newsletters, parent/teacher and induction meetings, written reports and a text-a-parent facility. The parents and the wider community give excellent support to the school regarding sporting, educational and financial assistance and their work in contributing to the physical school environment is commended. Consideration should be given to raising parental involvement in policy-review matters, as indicated by questionnaires.

- The management of pupils is good. The pupils are well behaved and courteous. Positive interactions are evident between the teachers and the pupils. Practically all pupils surveyed feel safe in school and know the school rules. There is scope to involve pupils more in decision making in the school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The overall quality of the school planning and school self-evaluation process is satisfactory. Appropriate, informative organisational policies are in place. Curriculum plans are insufficiently tailored to the school context. It is recommended that all teachers engage in a detailed review of each curriculum plan on a phased basis to ensure that these plans provide clear guidance on all aspects of their work in the classroom.

- Individual teachers’ plans are content- and topic-based with a lack of emphasis on pupils’ learning outcomes, particularly in terms of skills. All teachers should adopt an objectives-based approach to planning focusing on pupils’ learning outcomes and on targeted group teaching.

- The school’s current list of priorities provides an important springboard for more comprehensive action planning. There is a need for leadership roles to be assigned to review, monitor and evaluate the impact of school planning. A range of school data, including standardised and formative test results, and work samples, should be analysed on a whole-school basis to provide a detailed picture of pupil achievement and to identify and meet the learning needs of targeted groups within classrooms.
School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools. Evidence was provided to show 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.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

The quality of teaching and learning is generally good. The teachers are effective communicators and deliver well-structured lessons at an appropriate pace. The attractive, print- and mathematics-rich environments observed should be a feature of all teachers’ practice. Lessons are primarily teacher-directed and delivered on a whole-class basis. A wider variety of teaching methodologies that promote independent and collaborative-learning skills is required. There is a need for planned learning activities and resources to be more closely matched to pupils’ abilities and needs. Pupils exhibit good levels of engagement and application to their tasks.

The standard of Irish is generally good. The teachers emphasise the communicative approach when teaching new vocabulary and language exemplars. The pupils are provided with opportunities to practise these in pairs and in suitable contexts during lessons. Ongoing consolidation and extension of their communication skills is advised. The pupils perform a good range of songs and poems with enthusiasm. They are making appropriate progress with regard to their reading and writing programmes; there is scope to extend the breadth of their learning experiences through engagement with additional reading material and more independent writing.

The overall standard of English is good. There is very good development of early-reading skills which incorporates the teaching of phonics and word-attack skills, and the use of graded-reading material. Thereafter, the pupils’ reading skills are appropriately developed through the teaching of comprehension strategies, use of class novels and the promotion of reading for pleasure. There is scope to develop the pupils’ expressive oral language skills further using focused language-learning activities, drawn from specific curriculum objectives. The recitation and composition of poetry by pupils is good. All pupils engage in a broad range of writing tasks across the genres and good quality examples are evident. To build on this good work, more in-depth study of specific genres is advised on a whole-school basis.

The standards in Mathematics are satisfactory. Most pupils display competence in general number work regarding mathematical operations and the recall of number facts. There is scope for development in the teaching of the strand of measures, the use of mathematics in the environment and the systematic teaching of problem solving. All teachers explain the content of lessons clearly and use ‘hands on’ practical resources.
Some teachers ensure that oral mathematics sessions are capably used to reinforce key concepts. Whole-class teaching predominates with little emphasis on group teaching. Teachers need to ensure that their planning and teaching take account of individual pupils’ abilities in Mathematics based on assessment outcomes.

- The standard of Drama activity is good. The pupils experience a balanced programme which emphasises exploring and making drama, and also reflecting upon it. The pupils gave confident and assured performances in the school’s musical production observed during the inspection. The teachers use a range of drama conventions during drama lessons, including hot seating and mime, to develop the pupils’ empathy and to reinforce their understanding of stories and events. The use of drama strategies in promoting the pupils’ oral language skills across the curriculum should be extended.

- Assessment practices are satisfactory. All teachers carry out assessment on a small range of pupils’ learning experiences and the school administers standardised tests annually. The pupils’ learning, in terms of specific stated objectives, should be assessed more frequently and these records used to determine the match of learning activities to pupils’ abilities. There is a need for shared expectations regarding the pupils’ written work in terms of content and presentation and all teachers should provide feedback for improvement to pupils regarding their work.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- Overall, the quality of supports for pupils with special educational needs is very good. In-class and withdrawal support is provided. Teachers present interesting lessons that are focused on the pupils’ individual learning needs. Well chosen, appropriate resources and activities are provided leading to very good levels of pupil engagement and steady pupil progress. Through appropriate consultation, the pupils’ education plans (EPs) are compiled. There is a need to develop long-term targets, contained in the EPs, into more specific and progressive short-term objectives which are assessed systematically.

Published October 2011