

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Mary's School for Deaf Girls, Cabra
Dublin 7

Uimhir rolla: 17944E

Date of inspection: 15 March 2010



Whole-school evaluation

A whole school evaluation of St Mary's School for Deaf Girls was undertaken in March 2010. This report presents the findings of an evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of management, planning, the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of supports for pupils. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St Mary's School for Deaf Girls is located in Cabra, Dublin 7 and operates under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. It is designated by the Department of Education and Skills as a special national school for children who are Deaf or hard of hearing, aged four to eighteen years. The school's web site provides up-to-date information about life in St Mary's.

The pupils in the primary and post-primary sections are accommodated in separate locations which for most part, operate as separate sections of the school. The primary section is called Marian School and the post-primary division is called Rosary School. Twenty-three pupils board at the school on a weekly basis. Enrolment figures from the previous three years show a downward trend. An attendance policy outlines strategies for promoting good attendance. The annual attendance data is communicated to the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB).

Two special outreach classes share the same roll number as St Mary's. These classes have operated in the Anne Sullivan Centre for Deafblind, in Stillorgan, Dublin since 1995. The director of the Anne Sullivan Centre oversees the daily operation of the classes and supports the staff on a routine basis. St Mary's School has no involvement in the management of those classes since their establishment. Given the statutory responsibilities placed on boards of management by Section 14-21 of the *Education Act* (1998), it is recommended that the board of management of St Mary's seek clarifications from the Department in relation to its responsibility for the management of these classes.

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	67 +12 in Anne Sullivan Centre
Mainstream Primary classes	4
Teachers on the school staff	26 Permanent posts + 2 in Anne Sullivan Centre (Temporary Whole Time)
Post-Primary class teachers	19
Teachers working in support roles	1 Guidance post (shared)
	1 Learning-support post (10 hours)
Home-School Teacher	1
Special needs assistants	8 + 3 in Anne Sullivan Centre
Irish Sign Language Tutor	17 hours

1. Quality of school management

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

St Mary's School for Deaf Girls was established in 1846 by the Dominican Sisters. Over the decades, the school gained an international reputation as a centre of excellence and was influential in the establishment of schools for the Deaf in North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Pupils exhibit a wide range of hearing abilities and in some instances present with additional learning needs.

The school is particularly conscious of its importance to the Deaf community and articulates its vision in a clear mission statement. Staff members endeavour to keep abreast of developments in the education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing by enhancing their professional knowledge and skills. There is a strong sense of common purpose within the school community which includes pupils, parents, school staff and residence team. The Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP) acts as trustee of the school and supports its characteristic spirit.

The CIDP has supported the school in a number of other ways, including organising staff training in relation to child safety. It has also arranged for members of staff to visit other schools for the Deaf in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland and Norway. The CIDP has direct responsibility for the pupil residence, but is not involved in the daily management of the school. However, the CIDP does provide advice and a significant amount of financial support. This support helps to provide for secretarial services, the homework club, sporting amenities and staff training. Every six weeks, a meeting of the management team is convened. This team comprises the CEO of the CIDP, the principals of the two schools for the Deaf, the directors of care and the financial controller. The CEO maintains contact with the board of management of the school and visits regularly.

In addition to an increase in the proportion of pupils presenting with additional learning difficulties and other disabilities, the school endeavours to cater for a significant number of pupils of high ability who have no learning difficulty and for whom sign language may be the preferred mode of communication. The board of management and staff are aware of the changes in the school's population and recognise the importance of regularly reviewing the school's mission. While a positive ethos is in evidence at all levels and the adults are working to help every pupil achieve her potential academically, staff should review aspects of the general organisation of the school, particularly at post-primary level in order to ensure that all pupils are deriving maximum benefit from their school experience.

Both schools for the Deaf in Dublin face similar, evolving and challenging contexts. Mindful of the possibility of an amalgamation, collaborative planning and review could be mutually beneficial. Cooperation could focus on developing common policies in areas such as communication, assessment and supports for pupils.

1.2 The Board of Management

The board of management meets regularly and board members are very supportive of the work of the school. Individual roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and are discharged effectively. The board's decision-making procedures are open, transparent and predicated on the best interests of the school community. The board attaches a high level of importance to whole-school planning and board members contribute to the school's action plan. Policies are reviewed regularly and updated to reflect legislative requirements, especially those which relate to the care, welfare and protection of children. Policies and decisions are communicated effectively to the school community. The principal ensures that board members are well informed about the daily operation of the school through the provision of regular reports.

The board members are proud of the school's achievements and the quality of education services provided, including a range of extra curricular activities. While mindful of the proposed amalgamation with the boys' school, the board is also focused on making the best possible provision for the current cohort pupils. The board is also concerned about the need to enhance audiological provision and accessing external professional supports such as psychology and speech and language therapy. The board is mindful that the decline in the school's enrolment will lead to a significant reduction in staffing levels, which may impact on the school's capacity to continue to provide the current broad range of subject options at post-primary level. School management is working with the relevant statutory authorities to resolve issues that have arisen in relation to the provision of school transport for pupils.

1.3 In-school management

The principal leads and manages the school staff in a very effective manner. She inspires and motivates colleagues and has established a high level of personal credibility. Her leadership is characterised by high professional standards and high expectations for the staff and pupils at all times. She promotes a culture of team work and collaborative decision making. She consistently supports the professional development of newly qualified teachers and other members of staff.

Members of the in-school management team are encouraged to take the initiative and to undertake leadership roles in bringing about school improvement. The in-school management team comprises the deputy principal, assistant principals and special duties teachers. The team is cohesive and has a clear and purposeful range of duties which are agreed through consultation and regular review. Duties reflect the changing priorities of the school as a learning and teaching organisation. Priorities for development are identified and formal action planning is used effectively as a tool for managing change, innovation and improvement.

1.4 Management of resources

The accommodation in both the primary and post-primary school premises is well maintained. The school's secretarial support provides an efficient, courteous service.

The school has a swimming pool and each setting has its own games hall with stage, play areas and basketball courts. All available accommodation is used to meet the curricular and physical needs of the pupils. There are fourteen classrooms between both locations. In each location, there are also additional rooms available for administrative staff and for visiting professionals such as an audiologist and a speech and language therapist. There is ample space for staff, storage, display and extra curricular provision.

The primary section represents a very stimulating learning environment for the pupils. School corridors and classrooms are tastefully decorated with pupils' work samples in a wide range of curriculum areas. There is sufficient space in the post-primary section as class sizes are small. Designated rooms are allocated for Home Economics, Science, Mathematics and Art. Two rooms are also designated as computer rooms and a good range of information and communications technology (ICT) resources, including interactive whiteboards is provided. Teachers in St Mary's have used interactive whiteboard technology for several years and have developed significant expertise in its application. Although the staff has acquired significant ICT resources to support teaching and learning, computers are not provided in individual classrooms. This should be addressed in future planning.

The staff of St Mary's is proud of the school's tradition of making separate and distinct educational provision for pupils at primary and post-primary levels. Several of the pupils sit the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) examinations during the month of June.

At primary level, the teachers' timetables do not conform with Department regulations in all cases. At post-primary level, most teachers are timetabled for less than the maximum twenty-two teaching hours required by the Department. Staff at this level should be reminded that attendance at meetings or administration do not constitute recognised teaching time. Management should ensure that the school day conforms fully with the Department circular governing time in school (Time in School M29/95).

The staffing allocation in the post-primary section enables the school to offer a wide range of subjects and programmes. This has also given rise to class sizes with as few as five and in some cases two pupils. While this pupil-teacher ratio facilitates a high degree of individual support, it also creates a situation where opportunities for student discussion and group activities are limited. It is recommended that students be given opportunities to participate in larger learning groups with a view to developing their communication, social and interpersonal skills. The possibility of team-teaching amalgamated class groups from St Mary's and St. Joseph's school is a useful avenue to explore.

The majority of teachers have achieved additional qualifications in special education and specifically in the education of Deaf pupils. Teachers have accessed a range of national programmes of continuous professional development specific to subjects and to aspects of special education. Staff members in the school have given consideration to identifying innovative and effective practices relevant to Deaf education and they have devoted considerable time and energy to developing aspects of their practice. Focussed meetings for groups of staff are convened on a weekly basis where information is shared, in-house training is provided and aspects of the provision including pupil progress in curricular areas are discussed. A detailed information pack relating to the operation of the school, deafness, audiology and teaching strategies has been prepared. Copies of school policies and guidelines are also made available to new staff members who are mentored and supported effectively.

Staff members have prioritised improving their competence in communicating through Irish Sign language (ISL). They have attended independent training as well as school-based training provided through the *Special Education Support Service* (SESS). Different levels of accreditation have been achieved. The staff's commitment is appreciated by CIDP and the wider school community, who view the development of ISL as a critical success factor for the education of the Deaf. Communication, speech teaching, assessment and upgrading audiological equipment have been identified as areas requiring improvement and are being addressed. Other areas prioritised for future development include ISL training for teachers, educational audiology and the education of pupils with additional disabilities.

Eight special needs assistants (SNAs) are deployed to support pupils in a variety of ways. Some pupils have medical conditions including epilepsy and physical disability. A number of pupils also have care needs in areas such as self-care, administering medication, toileting and behaviour. SNAs also provide in-class support for pupils in accessing the curriculum. Several of the SNAs are Deaf and fluent in ISL. Many have completed training courses relevant to child-care. SNAs with communication competence make a significant contribution to supporting the pupils' personal and social development. Their assistance is valued by teachers especially where teachers are less experienced or confident in signing.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Effective home-school links are maintained by the school in a variety of ways. St. Mary's provides copies of significant school policies for parents, Parents and carers participate in parent-teacher meetings, school events and celebrations. There are flexible arrangements in place for parents to meet with teachers. Teachers have developed procedures for dealing with parents' concerns, giving due consideration to cultural, social and economic diversity and to deaf culture. Formal parent-teacher meetings are convened as well as Individual Education

Plan (IEP) meetings. There are flexible arrangements in place for pupils to meet with teachers and the school has developed effective ways of communicating with parents for whom English is an additional language. End of year reports are provided on pupils' progress. Other forms of communication include home-work journals, the school web site and a new information booklet, professionally developed by CIDP.

The parent population of St Mary's is dispersed across the country. Consequently, it is difficult for parent to attend after-school events or to become involved in a parents' association. The board of management is encouraged to renew its efforts to arrange for the establishment of a parents' association and to encourage parental involvement where practical.

One teacher is assigned to the role of home-school teacher. An objective of this post is to ensure that home-school links with the pupils' families and with the on-site residence for deaf girls are well developed. The home-school teacher ensures that meaningful communication is maintained with parents and with care organisations in the wider community. The role is multifaceted and involves significant levels of pastoral care and liaising with school staff and residential staff and parents. The role also involves dealing with enquiries about the school from visiting teachers and other professionals. This teacher also assists in the organisation of transport for pupils and acts as the liaison person for communicating with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and attending case conferences about pupils' needs.

Important contacts are maintained with the Deaf community, with youth groups in the locality and with various organisations in the locality. Regular links are developing with St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys through collaborative planning sessions. An inter-staff meeting was organised recently in association with CIDP to consider the proposed amalgamation of the two schools. Senior pupils from both schools participated in an ambitious school tour to Germany. As a means of building on these positive developments, the school management and staff should consider how human resources and facilities such as ICT can be shared between the two schools for the Deaf. The curriculum could be broadened for both sets of students through team teaching on cross-curricular projects. Students' communication competence could be developed through more stimulating class discussions involving boys and girls.

Parents' representatives on the board of management expressed strong support for the school and the education being provided. They consider that the school is well managed and they described the teachers as being caring and supportive. They expressed concern about the declining enrolment, proposed amalgamation and the lack of availability of speech and language therapy in the school.

The school has an over-arching commitment to improving the quality of education for Deaf pupils nationally and aims to develop into a centre of excellence and resource centre. The school has set up a family-support service for pre-school Deaf children and their parents, on a pilot project basis. This operates in the primary school for one day each week. The principal reports that the Department's visiting teacher service encourages parents to avail of the facility. The home-school teacher supports the service by sharing expertise on deafness in early childhood. An SNA helps the parents to develop their communication skills in sign language. At the time of the evaluation, six children were attending the service.

1.6 Management of pupils

Almost all pupils are eager and motivated in their learning and co-operate fully with the school's rules. They make a valuable contribution to the life of the school and they participate enthusiastically in curricular and extra-curricular activities. The pastoral needs of the pupils

including those with emotional or social needs are managed effectively in an atmosphere which promotes fairness and respect.

Personal responsibility, independence and positive civic and social attitudes are fostered among the pupils. School rules have been established. A code of discipline is in place and implemented fairly. Teachers successfully minimise disruption and inappropriate behaviour by establishing clear expectations and by skilful, sensitive management of pupil behaviour. The establishment of a pupils' council or committees would provide pupils with more formal opportunities to engage in decision making and to contribute suggestions for the onward development of the school.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of whole-school planning is very good. Planning processes are highly collaborative. A wide range of administrative policies in line with legislative requirements, departmental guidelines and circulars have been agreed and documented. External supports have been used effectively to facilitate whole-school review and to guide planning for improvement. Aspects of teaching, learning and policy formation in areas of administration and pastoral care have been identified successfully for development in a three-year strategic action plan.

At primary level, the curriculum policy documents are consistent with the principles of the curriculum. Plans for individual curriculum areas outline content statements that ensure continuity, breadth and balance in learning. They also identify teaching approaches and strategies to support curriculum delivery. These documents inform teaching methodologies to be adopted in teachers' long-term classroom planning.

Classroom planning takes full account of the principles of the curriculum and reflects the school's context and the learning needs of the pupils. It guides the teacher's work and contributes to successful learning. Monthly progress records are carefully maintained and are used to inform curriculum implementation. The teachers collaborate very effectively in planning for particular areas of the curriculum.

At post-primary level, there is a strong focus on preparing programmes of work leading to accreditation in State examinations. Subject specialists have planned and delivered programmes that are based for the most part on the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Transition Year programmes, and FETAC programmes. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are also offered. A whole-school policy on assessment, and subject plans for Business Studies and Accounting have been documented. It was reported that other subject teachers are in the process of completing their own subject plans. It has also been agreed that priority will be given to the development of whole-school literacy and numeracy strategies. This should ensure that all teachers consider the development of literacy and numeracy skills in their subject area planning. Given the range in pupil ability, better use should be made of the *NCCA Guidelines for Pupils with Mild General Learning Disabilities* in planning at post-primary level. No documentation relating to short-term or long-term planning by teachers at post-primary level was made available.

IEPs are prepared for all pupils in the primary section and for the junior cycle pupils in the post-primary section. The IEPs contain valuable information relating to modes of communication, progress in literacy and numeracy; and pupil's strengths and weaknesses. The use of an IEP format is a valuable addition to the range of planning formats used by teachers. The future effectiveness of the IEP process can be enhanced by ensuring that it is linked to, but distinguished from, other aspects of teacher's professional planning. This can be managed by focusing the IEP on pupils' overarching, priority learning needs which cross

subject barriers. This will require collaborative planning by a number of teachers at post-primary level.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

In conjunction with the trustee, the school has been proactive in reviewing and refining its child protection 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 *Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, September 2001). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including 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 Overview of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching throughout the school is generally good and very good in many instances. A solid foundation for learning is laid in the primary classes. Assessment of pupil learning through teacher observation is very effective at this level. Teachers, sometimes with help from SNAs, endeavour to ensure that clear explanations are given and that new content is presented carefully. ICT is used effectively. Good humour and good relationships between pupils and between teachers and pupils have a positive impact on learning at all levels.

Teachers' enthusiasm and knowledge of language development were prominent where best practice was observed. The organisation of differentiated learning activities in a wide range of curriculum areas ensured that pupils were able to access learning in a variety of ways. Teachers were effective in capturing pupils' full attention before communication. Questions succeeded in checking, challenging and extending pupils' understanding. Teachers are mindful of the need to reinforce the main learning points at the end of each lesson.

Pupils in the post-primary section are offered a range of programmes leading to state certification. A wide selection of subjects is provided at varying levels to suit their abilities and needs. Staff members seek to assist pupils in achieving the highest possible academic standards and the generous pupil-teacher ratio allows for the provision of much individual and differentiated support. In the most successful lessons in the post-primary section, teachers matched the work successfully to pupils' individual learning needs. Many pupils have a clear awareness of their own learning needs and they discuss their progress with their teachers. The teachers' high level of specialist knowledge in a range of subject areas enables them to set challenging work which pupils find stimulating and exciting.

At the time of the evaluation, post-primary pupils were allocated to designated rooms with teachers circulating between classes to deliver lessons. This arrangement adds to the challenge of managing teaching resources and providing print-rich, visually stimulating, learning environments for pupils. It is particularly unsuitable for Deaf pupils who have general learning disabilities. This model should be reviewed. An alternative arrangement, whereby the teachers are assigned to designated rooms should be considered. The assignment of a base classroom to each teacher would enable the teachers to provide better quality learning environments for the pupils. Access to teaching resources would be easier to manage and this arrangement also allows for better management of pupil records.

3.2 Language

Both English and sign language are used in daily communication throughout the school. At all levels, teachers are flexible in their approach to meeting pupils' diverse communication needs

and preferences. Some pupils sign clearly using ISL, while others prefer to use speech in their communication with others. Pupils and adults switch modes depending on circumstances and competence. Through interaction with older students and adults, the girls develop fluency in ISL. The school has benefited from the instruction provided by an ISL tutor. The tutor focuses on individual pupils and staff members to improve their signing competence. Sign language is used in almost every setting and the pupils interact and converse easily with each other and with adults. Staff members improve their own fluency in ISL by continuing with tuition.

One teacher with advanced qualifications acts as the ISL co-ordinator in the school. She has begun to draft a policy and curriculum for ISL with contributions by ISL tutors in St Mary's and St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys. When completed, the ISL curriculum will include receptive and productive skills, finger-spelling, subject specific vocabulary and non-manual features of ISL such as role-shift. The draft curriculum identifies the central importance of assessment with reference to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

It is recommended that the ISL curriculum be located within a whole-school communication policy. The communication policy should refer to the aspects which are fundamental and common to English and to ISL. The policy might refer to the importance of promoting expressive and receptive language in pupils and make reference to the importance of developing pupils' competence in carrying out the various functions of communication. It should also refer to the linguistic features and characteristics which are exclusive and distinctive to each language. The policy should specify teaching methodologies, content and modes of assessment. Already, Sign Language Assessments are conducted with some pupils in the primary section. The assessment of other pupils' competencies in sign language could also be carried out using video recordings or possibly by using instruments developed for *British Sign language* (BSL). Documents produced by the *Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People* (SIGNATURE) may also be helpful. The assessment of pupils' competencies in oral English should include speech tests. It should also include competencies listed in the national curriculum documents for English and possibly Irish, as many Deaf children experience English as an additional language.

Gaeilge

Tá cead ag na daltaí a fhreastalaíonn ar an scoil seo, gan Gaeilge a dhéanamh. Mar sin féin déanann na hoidí iarrachtaí feacht cultúrtha i leith an chultúir Ghaeligh a chothú i measc na ndaltaí, agus tugann siad deiseanna do na daltaí gnéithe den chultúr Gaelach a iniúchadh, rince, ealaíon agus ceardaíocht Ghaelach san áireamh.

Irish

The pupils in this school are entitled to an exemption from studying Irish. However, teachers endeavour to promote an awareness of the value of Irish culture among pupils and they provide opportunities for the pupils to explore aspects of Irish culture including dance and Gaelic art and craft.

English

In English, teaching at all levels in the school focuses on pupils' understanding and use of language so as to develop effective communication skills. As many of the children wear hearing aids or have cochlear implants, teachers make maximum use of modern audiological equipment to support teaching and learning. There is significant expertise among staff members in the area of audiology in education. Following a recent audit of audiological needs, the school plans to upgrade this equipment and make use of FM radio and *Soundfield* technology systems. This will ensure that pupils are exposed to amplified sound during the school day which will help the development their speaking and listening skills. The introduction of digital hearing aids and cochlear implantation will mean that phonological awareness can be developed more effectively and a variety of approaches including phonics can be used in the development of reading skills.

All primary classrooms are language-rich learning environments which support communication and language skills. Displays in classrooms and in corridors include relevant text from a range of curriculum areas. Experience charts are used very effectively to enable pupils to tell, sign and read personal experiences. Large format books are used with the younger pupils as a basis for structured reading and as a means of enabling teachers to model and read to children. Younger pupils are taught sight vocabulary and many older, higher-achieving pupils read from suitable age-appropriate books. Pupils make progress in reading as they progress through the school.

Teachers pay attention to the development of the pupils' writing skills. They are aware that achievements in writing are less well advanced. To take account of the impact of ISL, teachers pay careful heed to ensuring that pupils understand how sentences are constructed. Younger pupils write simple repetitive sentences, often from their own experiences. Lower attaining pupils write simple sentences with support. Higher attaining pupils write independent accounts even though some sentences are incomplete or written in ISL order. Literacy development across a range of subjects should be further developed at post-primary level.

All teachers in primary and post-primary classes make good use ICT and internet applications in particular. Pupils at post-primary level are allowed to participate in some group discussion with the teacher. Text is often presented to the pupils for group reading using the interactive whiteboard. The classroom libraries and central library are well stocked and there is a good range of suitable and age appropriate books and reading material.

In teaching reading and writing to post-primary pupils, the teachers are mindful that pupils still need to be explicitly taught vocabulary and English grammar. Teachers ensure that texts read or written for pupils match the pupils' vocabulary level. When selecting reading materials, teachers are careful to provide texts with meaning which pupils can access as independently as possible. The exploration of novels is commendable. Reading material which is aimed at the teenage market often contains colloquial language, which is hard to access for Deaf students. To counteract this, teachers place particular emphasis on explaining idiomatic language.

Text from different subject areas is sometimes rewritten by the teachers to take account of pupils' language needs. During guided reading and writing, pupils access text or writing with support from the teacher. The pupils' writing is not always faultless, but the aim is for pupils to be confident enough to express themselves. Re-drafting and correction is completed with the support of the teacher and much positive feedback is provided. In order to help with comprehension, the teacher repeats questions and answers given by the other pupils. In class discussions of reading assignments, comprehension questions are asked about the text to encourage the pupils reread and check for understanding. Questions posed are often simple literal questions. Better practice was observed where teachers ask questions which require inference or more specific grammar and language. Teachers should also seek to engender as much social interaction as possible during literacy activities.

As part of its efforts to develop literacy, the school participates in the *Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) 'Make a Book'* initiative. The school has designed and produced books on a variety of interesting topics. This cross curricular initiative is highly collaborative, involving pupils and staff. It involves considerable research and independent reading and writing on the part of pupils. It also involves practical and aesthetic work. When completed, pupils work in groups, retelling the stories in ISL and in English and this is recorded on video. This year, the project received recognition from groups such as the Variety Club Conference in the U.S., the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and the Centre for Deaf Studies. It

was also shared with a school in Newry, with whom St Mary's is linked for the Dissolving Boundaries project.

The development of pupils' written work should also be monitored more closely. Particular difficulties experienced by Deaf pupils need to be identified, such as the omission of word endings, or 's' in plurals, the mixing of tenses, omitting function words and confusing word order. Attention should also focus on pupils' narrative development, fluency, expression and vocabulary. In the primary section of the school, writing profiles are maintained. Samples are collected each year and placed in pupils' folders. This practice should now be extended. Samples of pupils' creative writing should be maintained to monitor and document the development of their writing skills as pupils progress through the school. These writing profiles should provide the basis for ongoing individualised planning.

Teachers' professional development should include training in how to use ISL to support literacy skills, meta-linguistic skills and phonological awareness. The place of Signed English and Sign Supported English in teaching literacy should also be documented in school policy.

3.3 Mathematics

Pupils at all levels are provided with opportunities to develop their understanding of basic mathematical concepts and to acquire the skills necessary for computation and problem solving. Mathematics is viewed as an essential skill for adult life and as a means of accessing other areas of the curriculum. Teachers are aware that teaching and learning in Mathematics involves practical, oral and written work.

At primary level, pupils engage with the full range of strands required in the Mathematics curriculum. Pupils' access to the curriculum is appropriately differentiated and an emphasis is placed on developing pupils' enjoyment. The pupils are provided with a broad range of opportunities to develop an understanding of basic concepts and to acquire mathematical skills. Appropriate concrete and visual materials are used. Teaching is based on sequenced learning objectives which are linked to the recording of progress. A suitable emphasis is also placed on the discussion of topics, the use of the language of Mathematics and the application of mathematical activities to contexts relevant to the lives of the pupils, including shopping and activities in the home. An agreed approach to the use of mathematical terminology is in place.

At post-primary level, pupils engage in Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and LCA mathematics programmes. There is a widespread emphasis on direct teaching of skills. Generally, new material is introduced on a whole-class basis. Content is clearly delivered and differential assistance is provided to individual pupils in completing assignments. As well as preparing for the state examinations in Mathematics, priority is also given to the development of functional skills and the use of Mathematics as a life-skill. Practical assignments are undertaken and written work is recorded on worksheets and in copybooks. This is carefully monitored and feedback is provided. At upper post-primary level, there is an emphasis on reinforcing mathematical skills that are associated with business and leisure activities. Pupils are offered Business Studies and Accountancy to Leaving Certificate level. The interactive whiteboard and ICT are used effectively in the teaching of Mathematics.

3.4 Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE)

A wide and interesting variety of learning experiences and projects are organised in SESE. Pupils engage purposefully in these activities exploring aspects of History, Geography and Science. In some instances, SESE themes are effectively integrated with other areas of the curriculum such as the Visual Arts and English. ICT is used regularly in SESE to support learning. The teachers have organised a structured programme of local and distant visits to museums, science exhibitions and to other places of interest. At post-primary level, students

study Geography, History and Science or the Environmental and Social Studies (ESS) syllabus.

In History, pupils develop their knowledge and understanding of people, periods, episodes and events. The pupils show a keen interest in History. They undertake a range of project work, much of which is of good quality and is carefully presented. Within the classroom they use a range of appropriate resources, including text, audio-visual material and artefacts. Teachers and pupils clearly enjoy their engagement in the teaching and learning of History.

In Geography, the teachers capitalise on the pupils' natural curiosity about the world, to investigate and to record a range of topics. Teachers challenge pupils with a variety of interesting content, activities and resources. The school buildings, grounds and local area are used effectively in structured programme of local and distant visits. The school has purchased atlases, maps and reference books which are used effectively. Younger pupils are taught about seasonal changes in weather and the effects which weather conditions have on the growth of plants. Well-maintained and stimulating nature tables are a commendable feature in primary classrooms. At post-primary level, good practice was observed where teaching included clear objectives, good exposition and careful questioning. Good use was made of fieldwork or by using pictures, maps and data in the classroom. The teaching activities were well chosen and lessons were well resourced. The programme in post-primary classes includes preparation for State examinations.

Science lessons are well planned, with clear objectives. In primary classes, a good foundation of knowledge and understanding in the basic skills of scientific enquiry is achieved. Teachers organise a range of practical activities and investigations that help pupils explore and understand the world around them. Basic scientific vocabulary is developed and pupils begin to learn how to formulate questions for investigation. At post-primary level, the programme is ambitious and more complex topics are explored. Scientific skills, knowledge and understanding are developed in small steps through practical activities. Group work is used to encourage pupil participation and to foster interpersonal communication. This is further developed in the senior section of the school. Pupils show the ability to work together on practical tasks with curiosity and interest. Most are well motivated and participate with enthusiasm in a range of appropriate activities including discussion, practical work and recording of findings.

3.5 Arts Education

Visual Arts

In the art lessons observed, pupils worked with a variety of two-dimensional and three-dimensional materials and experience the full range of curriculum strands. Teachers prepare art activities thoroughly and demonstrate skills clearly. They organise art activities in different ways, generally teaching pupils individually or in small groups. Pupils are enthusiastic about art and success in producing their own art raises their self esteem. Pupils know about well-known artists and can use some of the vocabulary related to art. Art is also used to illustrate topics in other subject areas and this approach allows for good cross-curricular links. Displays are a strong feature of primary and post-primary classrooms and corridors. Displays of pupils' own work and the work of famous artists promote the pupils' knowledge and understanding of artistic elements such as tone, line and texture. They are introduced to a variety of artists and to the artistic traditions of other cultures.

Music

The school is very proud of its successful partnerships with the *Analogue Devices* company and with Dublin City University. These partnerships aim to design improved technical aids for Deaf children. This has led to the design and installation in St Mary's of a purpose built sound perception room which is equipped with the latest technology and music making equipment. Pupils are timetabled for music lessons and pupils experience different music

styles, rhythms and sound effects. They thoroughly enjoy music making activities, exploring sounds and playing with simple musical ideas. They experience the satisfaction of working alone or with others in creating and performing their own musical compositions. Participation in theatrical and musical productions has been a traditional feature of school life in St Mary's. Partaking in these events facilitates pupils' emotional wellbeing and social development. Pupils and staff have collaborated very successfully in staging musical productions such as *Oliver*. Future whole-school planning should explore how the positive developments achieved can be extended to the post-primary section.

Drama

Drama is provided as a discrete subject to pupils at primary level. It is frequently used to reinforce concepts or themes from other areas of the curriculum, particularly Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in a range of imaginative contexts. Warm-up activities include group social games. Topics are chosen to promote team spirit and reinforce the importance of enjoying drama. The pupils are given opportunities to respond to story through the spontaneous acting out of drama scenes. Pupils' skill in the use of drama conventions such as mime, role play, improvisation and freeze-framing are expanded as they progress through the school.

At post-primary level, staff members with particular interest in drama enhance the provision at Transition Year (TY) level using computer and digital technology. Imaginatively constructed scenarios increase the pupils' ability to develop strategies for coping with potential life situations and to explore social issues which are relevant to their lives. Active learning situations are constructed in which pupils explore human relationships, behaviour and events. Pupils assume a collective responsibility for the creation and execution of a drama. They devise script outlines and discuss character development. The completed creation of whole-school productions and smaller projects are filmed for archival purposes.

3.6 Physical Education

At primary-level, Physical Education (PE) lessons are organised in the hall and in the playground. Pupils respond positively to a broad range of opportunities to develop their games skills and co-ordination. The PE lessons observed were very enjoyable for the pupils. Activities included ball games, skills circuits, athletics and cooperative games. Dance and basic gymnastics offered opportunities for pupils to experience the challenge of exercising control over their bodies whilst expressing creativity.

The trustee employs an external tutor to provide swimming lessons. The pupils enjoy this experience; many are confident in water and they gradually learn to float and swim with minimal support. Tuition is well planned and activities are carefully chosen to meet individual needs. Support staff provides additional assistance.

The post-primary section of the school previously had a full-time teacher for PE who retired but was not replaced. School management should examine the deployment of teachers to ensure that all pupils at post-primary level have access to appropriate teaching, and experience a suitable range of activities in PE.

3.7 Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE)

SPHE is provided as a component of the curriculum for all age groups. It incorporates Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). At post-primary level, SPHE is complemented by Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and by the Social Education component of the LCA. The aims of SPHE are further addressed through the specialist subject areas of Home Economics and through vocational preparation and guidance, including work experience. Teachers use pupils' routine social interactions as a context for addressing aspects of SPHE. SPHE is also taught through discrete lessons and through integration with other

subject areas. During the evaluation, a very positive atmosphere was evident in the school and relationships were based on mutual respect.

At primary level, general methodologies emphasising participation and discussion were observed, which were appropriate to SPHE. Social skills, personal responsibility and self-esteem were also reinforced in cross-curricular contexts and through the prevailing atmosphere of the school. In the post-primary classrooms, there was a greater emphasis on conventional, content-based approaches. There was also evidence of experiential, active and collaborative learning approaches at this level.

Home Economics

The school has three home economics teachers and two fully fitted home economics rooms. The programme includes content from mainstream post-primary curricula in food studies, social and health studies, consumer studies, resource management, home studies and textile studies. Learning activities in Home Economics are well organised and teaching objectives take account of pupils' abilities, interests, and needs. In planning and teaching, cross-curricular links are made with other subjects. During the lessons observed, resources and materials were used to good effect. Lessons were carefully structured and instructions, explanations and questions were clear. Basic literacy, numeracy, scientific knowledge, social interaction skills and elements of health education were reinforced.

A similar approach, aiming to develop social and communication skills, is employed in LCA project assignments and field work. The LCA programme also offers opportunities for pupils to develop workplace skills in planning, communication and teamwork through work experience in local businesses and services. Active participation is emphasised and valuable opportunities are provided for the development of practical and social skills for life and work. The pupils learn to use equipment in the appropriate manner and are given opportunities to consolidate their skills in food preparation.

3.8 Assessment

The school has developed a revised whole-school policy on assessment. The policy refers to the assessment for learning and assessment of learning methodologies in accordance with guidelines provided by the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* (NCCA). The school has acquired an extensive range of appropriate assessment materials to track pupil progress and attainment in communication skills, social development, literacy, numeracy and curriculum subjects. The assessment policy takes account of the specific linguistic challenges that Deaf pupils face.

At the time of admission, pupils meet the assessment team and undergo assessment by an audiologist and a psychologist. A file of each pupil's assessment record is maintained securely in the school. With parental permission, reports of pupils' progress are shared with relevant professionals such as the Beaumont Hospital Cochlear Implant Team and social workers. In the primary section, the monthly progress record is used to document work completed by the pupils. Other forms of assessment include teacher observation, portfolios and samples of pupils' work. Teachers also use standardised tests, diagnostic and criterion-referenced assessment instruments. Recently, standardised testing of pupils' achievement in literacy and numeracy has taken place. Test results should be reviewed at individual pupil, whole-class, and whole-school levels to identify particular areas of strength or weakness, and to plan whole-school strategies to address areas of particular difficulty.

When pupils transfer to the post-primary section, all of the relevant assessment information is passed on to class tutors. This information assists in selecting appropriate programmes and subject choices for each pupil. In the post-primary section, decisions about entering pupils for State examinations are taken on the basis of the individual pupil strengths and needs. Teachers engage in continuous assessment through classroom activities, projects and practical

work. Pupils are tested regularly as part of their preparation for State examinations. School reports are sent to parents at the end of the first school term and at the end of the school year. The teachers maintain assessment records in subject areas carefully and they have designed suitable worksheets and tests. JCSP and the LCA progress records are used to provide detailed records of attainment across many areas of the curriculum. Assessments for State examinations and applications for reasonable accommodations are coordinated by teachers with posts of responsibility.

4 Quality of Supports for Pupils

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

All of the pupils in the school present with needs related to deafness. Some pupils have additional needs, related to general ability or to diagnosed conditions. A small number of pupils also have physical disabilities and difficulties arising from visual impairment. The general well-being and safety of the pupils is a central concern for the staff of the school and close links are maintained with the management and staff of the residence. Regular meetings between members of the school staff and the residence are held to monitor pupils' progress and their welfare. Guidance is delivered to senior pupils in post-primary classes by the school's guidance teacher who is shared with St. Joseph's School for Deaf boys.

One teacher has been assigned to the role of home-school teacher on a full-time basis. This assignment is made as a means of taking account of the nature of the pupils' difficulties in communication, the dispersed parent population and the significant number of pupils who stay in St Mary's residence. The home-school teacher provides valuable support to pupils in relation to addressing behavioural, emotional, and personal difficulties particularly in adolescence. The role also involves the administration of a range of suitable assessments for current and prospective pupils.

Some professional collaboration between teachers and other professionals takes place. The enrolment policy indicates that placement in the school follows a case conference involving parents, teachers, a psychologist and other relevant professionals. At the time of the evaluation, no speech and language therapy was available to the pupils in the school. This is a cause of concern among the school staff. A speech and language therapist position has been approved by the HSE but this post has not been filled. Educational psychological support is provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Previously, psychological support was provided by the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB). The school has well-developed structures in place to support pupils at the time of enrolment and when they are due to leave the school. In preparation for transition, visits are arranged by the home-school teacher or the guidance teacher to third-level colleges and training centres. Useful links are maintained with relevant agencies.

The long-term ongoing support of the audiological service provided by the Dominican Sisters is acknowledged and greatly appreciated by the school. Over many years, St Mary's has benefited from its close links with the sisters who provide audiology support. Hearing aids are checked periodically and new earmoulds are provided as necessary. The principal reports that difficulties have been encountered whenever the school seeks to acquire funding for more elaborate hearing-aid equipment and group hearing-aid systems. However, the school should persist and renew its efforts to provide the most modern audiological equipment possible.

At the request of the trustees, an audit of the audiological needs of the school was conducted recently by an educational audiologist and acoustic engineer. The audit involved an examination of all rooms and equipment. The audit report indicates that there are significant deficits in the listening conditions for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in some of the classrooms and larger open spaces in the school. The report recommends acoustic treatment to the school building to make it more "deaf-friendly", the use of specialised equipment such

as radio aids and sound-field systems, the provision for each pupil of a personal FM system, and the availability of auditory trainers for the specialist teachers. The report also recommended that an adequate amount of hearing aid maintenance kits should be available, and that a named person should be responsible for the monitoring of aids and acoustic technology. Teachers should retain copies of all audiological assessments on file and a teacher should have responsibility for updating policy and promoting the best use of audiology resources. Where necessary, teachers should be trained to use the equipment and be able to ensure ongoing effective management. It is important that the board acts on this report without delay. Where necessary, applications for support should be made to the appropriate agencies.

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

The school authorities have put in place a number of practical arrangements to support pupils who come from less advantaged backgrounds. Many of the pupils avail of the free school-transport scheme which is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. School funds are used to supplement parental contributions to the cost of school outings or daily running expenses.

The culture and tradition at St Mary's promote an inclusive ethos that facilitates the access, admission and participation of pupils from all backgrounds and ethnic origins. The teachers develop tailored resources in several curriculum areas and take account of the needs of pupils for whom English is an additional language. Textbook materials and worksheets are rewritten with these pupils' language needs in mind. Particular attention is paid to subject-specific vocabulary and to the difficulties sometimes encountered with the 'carrier' language of written examinations. The school already makes use of a range of resources for English as an additional language.

To build on this good practice, a school policy on the inclusion of pupils from minority groups should be put in place. *Intercultural Education in Primary Schools* published by the NCCA and other official publications relating to interculturalism should be of significant assistance in this regard.

5. Conclusion

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school board of management is made up of experienced, well-informed, committed members who give voluntarily of their time and expertise to provide supportive direction and good governance to the school.
- The close connections with, and supports provided by the CIDP and by St Mary's Residence and the local audiology clinic brings considerable benefits to the school.
- The school is led by an outstanding principal who is well supported by a dedicated and capable middle management team.
- The school is staffed by competent and caring teachers who engage in extensive continuing professional development and who are keen to develop the service being provided.
- Teachers conduct lessons effectively using appropriate resources including ICT and are successful in engaging the interest of the pupils and in making learning pleasant for them.
- The school provides well-managed and valuable age-appropriate education programmes that boost students' self-esteem and confidence; and lead to national accreditation through State examinations and FETAC.
- The pupils are supported by dedicated special needs assistants, who are flexible in responding to the care needs of pupils and who assist the teachers in creating a positive school atmosphere. They also help in providing a supportive learning

environment where communication between adults and students is effective and where behaviour of students is commendable.

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's draft ISL curriculum be located within a whole-school communication policy.
- In developing the School Plan, the school should prioritize the development of a whole-school strategy for literacy.
- The school should act on the recommendations of the recent audit of its audiological needs and where necessary, should make representations for support to the appropriate agencies.
- It is recommended that the school review its staffing capacity to extend the range of pupils' experience in Physical Education in the post-primary section.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with some members of the staff and the board of management where the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.