Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Columba’s National School
Ballylast, Castlefinn
County Donegal
Uimhir rolla: 17956L

Date of inspection: 16 January 2015
Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in Saint Columba's National School in January 2015. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the school, interaction with pupils and review of their work, meetings with the principal and with board and parent representatives, completed parent and pupil questionnaires, and a selection of school documents. 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.

Saint Columba's National School, under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Derry, has fifty-four pupils enrolled. Pupil numbers have declined from seventy-one in 2011. School attendance is good. Currently, there are three mainstream class teachers, one shared support teacher and two special-needs assistants (SNAs) on the staff. One resource teacher, based elsewhere, and a part-time resource teacher also visit the school.

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The board of management supports the work of the school very effectively.
- The teaching-principal gives commendable leadership to the school and works in a collaborative manner with the staff.
- Teachers work in a very diligent, creative and earnest manner.
- Information and communication technologies (ICT) are used very well to support teaching and learning.
- Involvement in project work supports the pupils’ integrated learning experiences very effectively.
- The pupils display a very positive disposition towards their learning.
- The work of the parents’ association is highly commendable.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Moltar a thuilleadh béime a chur ar chothú scilean na éisteachta, labhartha, léitheoireachta agus scríbhneoireachta sa Ghaeilge agus measúnú sa teanga a chur chun cinn trasna na scoile. [Further emphasis should be placed on developing the pupils’ listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Irish and on progressing assessment in the language across the school.]
- Assessment for learning practices should be developed further in every classroom to support pupils’ learning.
- Long-term classroom planning for the dual class and multi-class contexts should be informed appropriately by curriculum objectives in all subjects. It is recommended that curriculum objectives are also incorporated into short-term planning.

Findings

1. The learning achievements of pupils
   - The overall learning achievements of pupils are commendable. In questionnaires, all parents agreed that their child is doing well in school.
   - The Aistear framework is implemented to good effect in the infant classes and is very supportive of the pupils’ language development. Pupils in the infant and middle classes, in particular, have learned a very wide repertoire of rhymes and poems. In the senior classroom, pupils demonstrate commendable oral confidence in discussing their project work.
Pupils have access to a wide variety of reading materials and are enthusiastic readers. While the quality of pupils' writing is good, they should be afforded more opportunities to engage in free writing in all classrooms.

Pupils have the opportunity to engage in active learning in Mathematics. They benefit from regular practice in mental maths. Pupils demonstrate good problem-solving abilities in the senior classroom.

Sa Ghaeilge, cé go bhfuil go leor rainn, focail agus frásai eagsúla ar eolas ag na daltaí, tá scóip chun forbartha a dhéanamh ar a scileanna teanga. (In Irish, while pupils know many rhymes, words and phrases there is scope for improvement in respect of their language skills.)

Pupils' learning in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) is very good. Pupils' personal safety is supported very well through the Stay Safe Programme which is delivered as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum.

Learning outcomes in the Visual Arts and in performing strands of the Music curriculum are very good.

Pupils with additional and special educational needs are making good progress in accordance with their abilities.

In questionnaires, all pupils agreed that teachers talk to them about how to improve their work and that their homework is usually checked. There was some variation in their responses in respect of opportunities to participate regularly in group work and to have a say in how things are done in the school; these findings should prompt discussion and follow-up at school level.

2. Quality of teaching

- The overall quality of teaching is very good and some very creative individual practice was observed. Teachers use ICT very effectively to enhance the presentation of lessons. The teaching of literacy and numeracy is supported well through attractive, print-rich classroom environments.

- All teachers provide regular written planning for their work. It is recommended that short-term plans incorporate curriculum objectives, however. It is further recommended that long-term classroom planning for the dual class and multi-class contexts should be informed appropriately by curriculum objectives in all subjects. Further consideration should be given to planning for differentiated needs in each classroom.

- Tá deis fhorbartha ann maidir le múineadh agus le húsáid neamhfhoirimiúil na Gaeilge ar fud na scoile. Moltar a thuilleadh béime a chur ar chothú scileanna éisteachta, labhartha, léitheoireachta agus scríbhneoireachta sa Ghaeilge agus measúnú sa teanga a chur chun cinn trasna na scóil. (There is room to improve the teaching and the use of informal Irish throughout the school. Further emphasis should be placed on developing the pupils' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Irish and on progressing assessment in the language across the school.)

- Pupils' progress in literacy and numeracy is tracked efficiently using standardised assessments, screening tests and teacher-designed tasks and tests. More use of assessment for learning approaches (AfL), in particular the increased use of self and peer-assessment, is recommended across the curriculum.

- The quality of teaching provided for pupils with additional educational needs in literacy and numeracy is very good. Further support should be sought from relevant agencies with respect to classroom supports for pupils with identified special educational needs.

- Responses to parental questionnaires indicate strong support for the school. Almost all parents agreed that teaching is good and that their child enjoys school. A small number of parents were unsure as to whether their child had a weekly PE lesson: parents should be reassured in this regard.

3. Support for pupils' well-being

- The quality of supports for pupils is very good. During the evaluation, positive relationships were evident in all classrooms and the pupils’ behaviour was very good. The SNAs provide very good support to the pupils in their care.
• The school takes part in a number of initiatives including Green-Schools and Roots of Empathy. Participation in the Active Schools Programme is recommended.

• Responses to pupils’ questionnaires indicate that most pupils like school and enjoy their lessons and learning. It is advised that a student council be established to facilitate pupils in expressing their views on relevant school matters.

• Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

4. Leadership and Management

• The board of management supports the work of the school very effectively. The board should now consider providing an annual report to parents on the work of the school and continue to seek the views of parents on school matters.

• The teaching-principal gives commendable leadership to the school and works in a collaborative manner with the staff. The principal is supported very ably by the deputy principal who attends to all assigned duties with particular care. Going forward, more equitable distribution of pupil numbers is recommended across the three classrooms. Periodic rotation of teachers is recommended to support professional development.

• The ancillary staff contributes significantly to the smooth operation of the school.

• The work of the parent association (PA) is highly commendable. For example, the PA supports school activities, undertakes many fundraising activities and holds information evenings for parents.

• Home-school communication is good. It includes parent-teacher meetings, regular newsletters and text alerts.

5. School Self-evaluation

• Whole-school planning is comprehensive. A website, currently under development, could be used to provide parents with continued access to key policies.

• Ba chóir athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an bpolasaí Gaeilge agus clár don labhairt, don léitheoireacht, don scríbhneoireacht agus don mheasúnú do chomhthéacs ilranganna a rianú ann. (The Irish policy should be reviewed and a programme for speaking, reading, writing and assessment for the multi-class context should be documented therein.)

• A good start has been made to school-self evaluation. School improvement plans and associated reports on the work being undertaken in literacy and numeracy have been drawn up and are due to issue to parents. Targets for improvement have been set and good progress has been made to date in achieving those targets. While assessment results in English reading show some improvement over the past two years, improvement in literacy should continue to be prioritised so as to ensure pupils are progressing as well in literacy as they are in numeracy.

Conclusion

The school’s capacity to develop further is very good given the motivation and enthusiasm of all staff to progress pupils’ learning.

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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 BOM of St Columbas N.S. welcomes the findings of the WSE MLL as it acknowledges and affirms the excellent work of our staff, ably supported by our parents and school community.

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

The BOM and staff welcome the recommendations and will use this report as a guide to planning for the future in our school. The school has already implemented some of the suggestions; others will be introduced as soon as is feasible.