Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire gan Smal
Lixnaw, Co. Kerry
Uimhir rolla: 18084I

Date of inspection: 10 February 2011
1. Introduction
Scoil Mhuire gan Smal is a Catholic primary school with four mainstream class teachers.

Boys transfer to Scoil Mhuire de Lourdes boys’ school when they have completed senior infants. The two schools agreed to amalgamate in May 2003. It is recommended that the proposed amalgamation now be actively re-explored.

Eighty-four pupils are currently enrolled. For most pupils, attendance is good or very good. There is a minority whose attendance is a cause for concern. It is recommended that the school draft and ratify a comprehensive school attendance policy with the explicit aim of encouraging the regular attendance of all.

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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The board has completed a range of school improvement projects.
- The quality of teaching and learning in English is of a good standard.
- Some very good examples of teaching and learning were observed during the evaluation.
- Teachers utilise available resources and concrete materials to good effect to support learning and teaching.
- The quality of teaching provided to pupils with learning difficulties is of a good standard.

The following main recommendations are made:

- The board should review how it is discharging its functions as outlined in the Education Act 1998 and address the issues that emerge, particularly those in relation to records and compliance with Departmental requirements.
- The board should encourage and facilitate the formation of a parents’ association.
- The school needs to establish effective systems for reviewing its work and for identifying and implementing changes to bring about improvement. The in-school management team, under the principal’s direct leadership, should take an active role in this.
- As a matter of absolute priority, the board should formally adopt the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools and ensure that the school is fully compliant with all other requirements of Primary Circular 0061/2006 Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures for Primary Schools.
- The school should develop a comprehensive assessment policy and implement it.
- Teachers should ensure that the principles and objectives of the Primary School
3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is properly constituted. It has successfully completed a range of school improvement projects. However, the manner in which the board operates and how it discharges its functions are causes for concern. Specifically, there are inadequacies in relation to the frequency of its meetings, the maintenance of records of meetings and compliance with relevant legislation, Departmental circulars and guidelines. These need to be addressed without delay. The board’s accounts are certified annually and this good practice is recognised. However, accounts of monies received and expended need to be maintained on a regular basis and in sufficient detail. It is not clear that grants received from the Department are spent for the intended purposes. The school should ensure that the requirements of Circular 0021/2010 regarding class size are complied with and that there is an equitable distribution of pupils in mainstream classes. Also, the requirements of Circular 11/95 Time in School in relation to amount of daily instruction time and time allocated to curriculum areas need to be fully implemented. It is recommended that the board access specific training to support it in discharging its functions.

- The principal articulates a vision for the school based on the provision of a holistic education for the pupils in which their individual talents are recognised and nurtured. She fulfils her administrative duties satisfactorily. A range of duties is delegated to the deputy principal and these duties are conscientiously discharged. It is recommended that the in-school management team, under the direct leadership of the principal, actively engage in whole-school improvement initiatives. For this to be effective, it will be important that staff, the board and the community commit to reflective and systematic self-evaluation which has the explicit purpose of improving the quality of pupils’ experiences and their standards of attainment.

- The board recently installed interactive white boards in each classroom. This is praiseworthy. However, in general, the quality and quantity of resources to support learning and teaching are not adequate to meet the needs of the curriculum. In most classrooms flooring and furniture are in need of replacement. It is recommended that a prioritised list of supportive resources and classroom improvements be identified and that these be addressed as finances permit.

- The employment of a number of external tutors and coaches is resulting in an imbalance in the delivery of the curriculum. It is strongly recommended that the board satisfy itself that all external tutors and coaches work under the guidance of the class teacher and that they are sufficiently familiar with the Primary School Curriculum (1999), school policies and plans.

- The management of relationships and communication with the school community is of a poor standard. An analysis of parents’ questionnaire responses clearly indicates that the majority of parents are not satisfied with how the school addresses a wide range of issues. It is recommended that the board encourage and facilitate the formation of a parents’ association. It is further recommended that the issues raised in the parents’ questionnaire responses be proactively addressed by the board.

- The management of pupils is of a fair standard. During the evaluation period the pupils worked co-operatively and they presented as pleasant and courteous individuals.
However, in their responses to questionnaires issued, a significant percentage of pupils raise issues which the school should address in the short term, specifically in relation to bullying, to awarding pupils with increased opportunities to be consulted on how things are done in the school and to ensuring that teachers explain things clearly to pupils in lessons. The board should also ratify a homework policy.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The quality of the whole-school plan is poor. Curriculum plans provide little guidance to class teachers, particularly in relation to whole-school approaches for providing pupils with continuity and development of learning between class levels. Some organisational policies have been ratified by the board. It is recommended that a strategic plan be developed in which organisational policies and curriculum plans are prioritised for whole-school development. Priority should be placed on the development of whole-school approaches in literacy and numeracy. The school’s self-evaluation processes are also in significant need of development. The school has not yet developed the structures necessary to enable it to determine for itself the effectiveness of its work or the appropriateness of outcomes and, as a consequence, what it needs to do to improve. It is therefore recommended that the school devise and implement effective systems for keeping its work under review and for making changes to bring about improvement.

- The quality of teachers’ planning varies from fair to good. Where good planning was presented it provided for high quality learning experiences and activities which reflected the learning needs of the pupils and the skills and content of the curriculum. It is recommended that staff share good practice in this area and that a common approach to teacher planning and recording be agreed and implemented.

- School authorities did not provide 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. Sufficient evidence was not 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 not been formally appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines. It is of paramount importance that these issues are addressed without delay.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The quality of teaching in the lessons observed during the evaluation period was of a fair to very good standard. Most lessons had clear objectives, though the use of these objectives to review learning was less well established. Teaching is well supported by good classroom relationships and the utilisation of a range of appropriate approaches and methodologies. Pupils were observed to engage enthusiastically in their lessons and the quality of their understanding is clearly reflected in their oral responses. However, there is a need to ensure that pupils’ learning and engagement in learning activities is more clearly reflected in the quality of their written work across the subject areas evaluated. Furthermore, teachers’ heavy reliance on textbooks militates against the selection of lesson content which appeals to and engages pupils and which is reflective of their interests and life experiences.

- The quality of teaching and learning in English is of a good standard. The majority of pupils read with fluency and accuracy, and are confident and competent in speaking. Results of previous standardised tests administered in English indicate that the pupils are achieving good to very good standards. It is recommended that future reviews of the
English plan focus on whole-school approaches to the teaching of phonics and phonological awareness, the development of a discrete oral language programme, the exploration of a wider range of reading texts and writing genres, the placing of a focus on the teaching process and the development of the cognitive and emotional and imaginative skills of the pupils.

- The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics varied from a fair to a good standard. Half of the teachers observed used concrete materials in the teaching of Mathematics. Mathematical language is well addressed by all teachers. The majority of teachers are praised for the systematic addressing of oral mathematical activities as an integral part of each lesson. However, the rigid adherence to textbooks resulted in many of the pupils being under challenged during lessons and contributed, in general, to poor lesson structure and pacing. Pupils, in their responses to questionnaires, feel that greater emphasis could be placed on the giving of clear explanations. It is therefore recommended that the school review the manner in which Mathematics is taught in the school and that revised practice reflects clearly the aims and objectives of the mathematics curriculum.

- In the teaching of Irish teachers rely too much on the textbook scheme for the development of their plans and, because of this, the schemes and approaches of these teachers do not adhere precisely to the aims and basic principles of the primary school curriculum. The curriculum recommends a particular structure for the Irish lesson so that the lesson can be as communicative as possible. It is now recommended that communicative activities be arranged so that new language can be practised and recreated. The pupils know a wide range of rhymes, poems and songs throughout the school. In general, the pupils have attained a satisfactory standard in reading and writing. It is recommended that additional reading material be provided from which stories could be selected and used for the sake of enjoyment. It is recommended that the scope of work in writing be extended so that pupils are provided with a broader range and variety of functional and personal writing tasks.

- The quality of teaching in Drama lessons observed during the evaluation period was of a good to very good standard. Pupils were facilitated to enter into fictional contexts and good emphasis was placed on talk and discussion. Group and paired work featured in all lessons and this good practice is praised. The school has, in the past few years, employed an external tutor to deliver weekly drama lessons to the pupils and consequently, teachers have transferred the responsibility for the teaching of Drama to this tutor. This practice should be reconsidered. The school should ensure that the aims and objectives of the drama curriculum are fully addressed in an integrated manner, thereby facilitating pupils to access a broad and balanced drama curriculum.

- Arrangements for the assessment, recording and reporting of pupils’ progress are not satisfactory. It is acknowledged that there are some good practices: some teachers utilise teacher-designed tests to provide summative assessment data and others use checklists...
to record pupils' progress in areas of literacy and numeracy. The members of the support team utilise diagnostic tests to good effect to assist in the identification of learning targets for pupils in need of support. However, a limited range of assessment modes is used on a whole-school basis. The school should be mindful to the content of Department Circular 0138/2006 regarding the implementation of standardised tests. It is necessary also to ensure that the results of these tests are communicated effectively to parents. The school has begun to retain individual pupil records since 2009. This good practice should be further developed. It is recommended that the school develop a comprehensive assessment policy which is in line with Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum; Guidelines for Schools and complies with Circular 0138/2006.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- At present, there are no pupils with low incidence special educational needs enrolled in the school. Therefore the resource teacher who is shared with Scoil Mhuire de Lourdes currently works full time there.

- The learning support teacher, who is also shared with Scoil Mhuire de Lourdes, provides support to pupils with learning difficulties for two and a half hours each day. A part-time teacher, who also provides support in both schools, works with pupils in Scoil Mhuire gan Smal for one hour a day. Both these teachers provide good quality support to pupils. It is recommended that the deployment arrangements for these teachers be re-structured to ensure better continuity of provision for pupils in both schools. It is further recommended that the practice of referring pupils to the learning support teacher without the written permission of their parents be discontinued and that criteria for referral for support be explicitly stated in the learning support policy.

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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, staff and the whole school community of Scoil Mhuire gan Smal wish to extend a sincere thank you to the Department of Education and Skills Inspector for the courteous, constructive and professional manner in which she carried out the Whole School Evaluation.

The commitment, support and advice of the inspector throughout the entire W.S.E process is very much appreciated and valued by the Board of Management and staff.

We welcome the fact that the report identifies a very good standard of teaching and learning especially in English. The quality of support for students with learning difficulties has been commended.

We welcome the fact that the report identifies the improvements in the provision of resources in the school. The development of the school facilities was curtailed recently because of the prospect of amalgamation with a local school. As this amalgamation is now unlikely further improvements can be effected to ensure the comfort safety and wellbeing of the staff and students in Scoil Mhuire gan Smal.

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 and staff welcomes the advice and recommendations of the report. The Board of Management, working alongside the Principal and staff, will facilitate the recommendations outlined in the W.S.E report.

The Board of Management has initiated the formation of a Parents’ Association and this has provided excellent opportunity for parents to participate in the development of school policy. The Parents’ Association has planned organised and successfully completed two collaborative fundraising ventures.

The Board has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guideline for Primary Schools in accordance with the recommendations of the W.S.E.

A number of school policies have been prioritised, reviewed and ratified by the Board of Management in consultation with the Parents’ Association.

An action plan will be drawn up by the Board of Management in consultation with the Parents’ Association and the in-school management team to identify, and implement the other recommendations of the W.S.E and the progress of this action plan will be monitored on a regular basis.