An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Náisiúnta Mhuire
Ardara, Co. Donegal
Uimhir rolla: 18131O

Date of inspection: 27 January 2011
1. Introduction

Scoil Náisiúnta Mhuire is a co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Raphoe. There are 30 pupils from junior infants to sixth class and a teaching staff of two mainstream teachers, one learning-support and one resource teacher. The school participates in the rural programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and in the Modern Languages for Schools initiative. While school attendance is generally satisfactory, a review of attendance levels indicates that a significant minority of pupils was absent for more than twenty days in the last two school years. Four subjects were evaluated during this evaluation: English, Irish, Mathematics and Drama. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; 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:

- The board of management displays a clear commitment to supporting the work of the school.

- The teaching principal creates a positive, harmonious working environment and a culture of shared responsibility is embraced by all staff members.

- The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall; the teachers work in a conscientious manner and are committed to school improvement.

- The school is welcoming, bright and well resourced. In particular, the school library and recently acquired information and communications technologies (ICT) enhance the pupils’ learning.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Clearly focused, whole-school teaching approaches, including differentiation and team-teaching, should be implemented as a means of improving provision in literacy and numeracy.

- Further parental input into the development and review of organisational policies should be sought prior to their ratification by the board of management.

- The board of management should facilitate the establishment of a parents’ association in order to further strengthen links between parents and the school.
3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is properly constituted and members display a clear commitment to supporting the work of the school. The board has ratified some policies which were presented to it by the teaching staff. For example, the board is currently considering the school’s health and safety policy. While key policies are shared with parents at the beginning of each school year, it is recommended that parental involvement in policy development and review be systematically encouraged. Differentiated teaching and team-teaching approaches should be promoted more appropriately by school management as a means of improving provision in literacy and numeracy.

- The in-school management team, comprising the teaching principal, deputy principal and a special duties teacher, works well together. The teaching principal creates a positive harmonious working environment and a culture of shared responsibility is embraced by all staff members. Each team member makes a valuable contribution taking successfully in curricular, organisational and pastoral duties. However, it is recommended that the duties of post holders be aligned more closely to the priority needs of the school in literacy and numeracy. A class allocation policy would be beneficial in order that teachers have equitable opportunities to avail of both mainstream and support teaching experiences, as practicable.

- The school has plentiful resources overall and these are managed effectively. The school was refurbished recently and mainstream and support classrooms present very well. However, the accommodation available for one support setting is unsuitable for its purpose and alternative provision should be made within the school. The school library is a wonderful resource and the recent installation of information and communications technologies (ICT) enhances the pupils’ learning.

- The school benefits from the dedicated and careful support of a secretary, shared with two other schools in the area, and a special needs assistant. Cleaning and caretaking service is of a high standard.

- The management of relationships with the school community is good. It is recommended however that the board facilitate the formation of a parents’ association in order to strengthen further links between the parents and the school. In questionnaires, administered as part of the evaluation, many parents indicated that they were not invited to contribute views about school policies. Most parents indicated that the school was well run and that teaching and discipline were good.

- During the evaluation, the pupils were managed well and classroom organisation and management were satisfactory. The majority of pupils indicated in the questionnaires administered as part of the evaluation that they know the school and class rules and that they get on well with other children in the school. The school has retained a small number of pupils for a repeat year in 2010-11. It is recommended that all future decisions in respect of the retention of pupils should be made in full compliance with the conditions outlined in Circular 32/03.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The quality of school planning and school self-evaluation has scope for development. Many organisational policies have been developed by the principal and staff but they have yet to be ratified at board level. Some good work has been undertaken by the teachers in curriculum planning. However, a number of curricular plans should be
revisited so that differentiated teaching and team-teaching approaches are more clearly outlined and promoted.

- The quality of teachers’ individual classroom planning is satisfactory overall. The current format of monthly progress reports should be re-considered, however, so as to better assist the self-evaluation process. In their three-year DEIS action planning, teachers have identified the need to improve literacy and numeracy and to promote parental involvement further in the life of the school. These priorities, as identified by the teachers, accord well with the evaluation findings.

- 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, learning and pupil achievement in Irish is satisfactory. A positive attitude to Irish is fostered among pupils and they enjoy their learning of the language. Some pupils display a good understanding of the language. It is recommended that planning for Irish be reviewed to ensure that pupils’ language ability is developed and extended systematically from class to class. The majority of pupils can read with fluency and writing standards are satisfactory. Further planning for independent writing, using a variety of techniques including the use of writing frames and paired-writing, is recommended. Objective-based assessment checklists should be devised to evaluate pupils’ progress in writing in particular.

- While provision for English is generally satisfactory, there is scope for development in certain areas. Talk and discussion are utilised to good effect in both classrooms and most pupils articulate confidently and clearly. Reading is well attended and pupils are given plentiful opportunities to read. The majority of pupils can read with fluency. However, there is scope for further differentiated approaches to reading so as to cater more effectively for the varying abilities across the school. Poetry is taught well and pupils discuss poems with understanding. There is scope for development in the teaching of writing. For example, drafting and editing of pupils’ work should be promoted and more opportunities provided to write in different genres.

- The quality of teaching in Mathematics is satisfactory overall. Effective lessons were presented during the evaluation and there was good use of concrete materials and discussion. However, further focus on improving learning outcomes is recommended. In
In this context, clear targets should be outlined for team teaching and systematic assessment approaches should be used to monitor progress in learning. Pupils present their work neatly and there is evidence of regular correction of written work.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in Drama is good. Discussion and role play are promoted very well, and pupils are provided with opportunities to create scenarios in groups. Assessment records are maintained on pupils’ progress in the subject.

- The quality of overall teaching observed during the evaluation was satisfactory. However, there is scope for development in terms of the pupils’ overall achievement in literacy and numeracy. The results of standardised testing indicate that current teaching and learning approaches must be re-examined and that new, whole-school teaching approaches should be implemented.

- It is recommended that pupils’ achievement in standardised tests be communicated to parents in accordance with Circular 138/2006. It is also recommended that the school monitors its assessment data carefully over a number of years so as to ascertain improvement.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- The quality of learning-support and resource teaching is very good. Individual programmes of work are planned carefully in consultation with other professional personnel and parents. The two support teachers employ a suitable mix of in-class and withdrawal approaches and there is very good variety in the programme of support provided. Based on the targets outlined, the quality of outcomes for pupils with special educational needs is very good. Progress reports for pupils with special and additional needs are shared regularly with parents.

- A DEIS co-ordinator, shared between six schools, visits this school one day per week. The quality of provision in this area is good overall. Reading is successfully promoted with groups of pupils on a withdrawal basis. Sixth-class pupils participate in workshops organised by Tir Boghaine Teo to prepare for transition to post-primary education. Other co-curricular activities are organised effectively such as the Heritage in Schools Project and parent-child programmes developed by the Health Service Executive. External tutors provide coaching for pupils in sports and football during the school term.

- The school participates in the Modern Languages Initiative where an external tutor teaches French twice weekly to fifth and sixth-class pupils. Teaching approaches are active and highly participatory and the pupils are making very good progress.

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