1. Introduction

Scoil an Fhraoich Mhóir is a mainstream, co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin. It is situated in The Heath, a small community in the parish of Portlaoise. Pupil enrolments in the school have increased steadily over the last six years and currently 205 pupils attend the school. 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The principal affords very effective leadership to the school.
- Teachers display a high degree of competence and confidence in their teaching.
- The quality of pupils’ learning in English and Mathematics is very good.
- The school provides very effective supports for pupils with special educational needs.
- Pupils are engaged in their learning and courteous and respectful throughout the school.

The following main recommendations are made:

- A structured oral language programme that develops pupils’ oral competencies in English and Irish should be implemented at all levels within the school.
- A whole-school plan for teaching the subject-specific language of the various curricular areas should be devised and implemented.
- Teachers’ short-term plans and monthly progress records should be based on specific content objectives of the curriculum.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management discharges its duties very effectively. It meets frequently, considers a broad range of issues at its meetings and ensures correct procedures are adopted when dealing with all matters. Individual board members are commended for the active role they play in school life. The board should ensure that an agreed report is a standard item at all meetings and that its contents are disseminated to the school community. The board should also investigate means of formalising communicative structures between it and the parents’ association and of raising awareness about its work amongst parents.

- The principal is a very effective school leader. He is a visible presence in the school and successfully leads initiatives within it. He nurtures a collaborative atmosphere amongst the staff and enables them to adopt leadership roles in school life.

- The in-school management team meets regularly to discuss school management issues. All members of the team have specific duties which are diligently fulfilled and make a
meaningful contribution to school life. The range of these duties should be increased so that all teachers with posts of responsibility have leadership roles in curricular, administrative and pastoral domains. A process of regularly reviewing duties, in the light of the evolving needs of the school, should also be implemented.

- The parents’ association is praised for its commitment and the broad range of activities it organises. Specific projects that involve parents in curricular projects are also facilitated. This is very good practice and should be continued.

- Parents feel welcome within the school and are kept very well informed of general school matters. In regard to information on their child’s education, parents express their satisfaction with arrangements for parent-teacher meetings and with the contents of school reports. The school is advised to provide parents with their children’s standardised tests results in written format as required by circular 0138/2006.

- Positive pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relationships prevail within the school. Discipline in all classes is very good and pupils are well supervised during the school day. Means of affording pupils a greater voice in general school affairs should be explored.

- Resources are very well managed and optimum use is made of existing facilities to provide a well-ordered, stimulating learning environment.

- The strong sense of community that prevails within the school and the strong links between the school and the local community are acknowledged and affirmed.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- Administrative policies are well written and provide clear guidance to the school community. In line with best practice, policy development is an on-going process and parents, through the parents’ association, make a significant contribution to it. The school should now devise policies on career breaks for teaching staff and on data protection. It is also advised to revise its enrolment policy, learning-support policy and assessment policy.

- The school has a suite of good quality curriculum plans. Plans for English and Mathematics provide clear guidance on key aspects of curriculum implementation. In the visual arts’ plan greater guidance on strand units dealing with looking and responding to art is recommended. Sections on the key concepts of art and on structure for choosing content would also enhance the quality of this plan. Consideration should also be afforded to developing a two-year cycle for the implementation of the visual arts’ curriculum. The plan for Irish would be of greater benefit to teachers if it detailed the expected development in pupils’ language skills as they progress through the school.

- In general teachers plan well for their teaching. In some cases short-term plans are informed by specific curriculum objectives. This is very good practice which should now be adopted consistently throughout the school. The format of monthly progress records should also be revised to record attained objectives.

- School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools. Evidence was provided to show that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the
procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The quality of teaching and learning is very good. Teachers display well developed teaching and classroom management skills. They present structured lessons and facilitate very appropriate learning activities. Some teachers differentiate learning activities to cater for the varying needs of pupils. This is very good practice and should now become integral to teaching and learning in all classes.

- A culture of professional reflection on teaching and learning is nurtured in the school. This is reflected in valuable evaluation undertaken by some teachers on the successes and challenges encountered in their lessons. This is a very beneficial commencement to professional self-evaluation which should be fostered throughout the school.

- A range of appropriate assessment strategies are implemented at whole-school level. The system of tabulating pupils’ results in these tests should be developed in order to track pupil progress through the school and to compare individual attainments in various tests.

- The school has devised a uniform pupil profile to record data garnered through non-standardised assessments. This is good practice and teachers should now ensure that key data is recorded in this profile that is subsequently utilised to support pupils’ learning.

- Overall the quality of teaching and learning in Irish is good. Lessons are presented energetically and good use is made of resources to support pupil learning. Very valuable work is done in poetry and song and some very interesting exercises in listening and writing were observed. In conversation the communicative approach is evident in all classes. Learning outcomes in this area would be enhanced, however, if an increased emphasis were placed on teaching language structures and if pupils received more frequent opportunities to use the language in natural conversations.

- English is taught very competently. Pupils at all levels are exposed to a broad range of writing genres and the quality of their writing is very good. Pupils read with fluency and understanding and very impressive efforts are made to promote a culture of reading throughout the school. The continuation of the structured phonics scheme, currently implemented in junior infants, to senior infants and first class would further enrich the programme. Very good work in poetry complements the oral language programme at all levels. A more structured approach to oral language, which focuses on enhancing pupils’ oral competencies and which is informed by specific curriculum objectives, should now be implemented throughout the school.

- Effective practice is evident in the teaching of Mathematics. Lessons are well structured and paced, good use is made of resources and pupils receive valuable opportunities to engage in practical activities. Pupils’ attainment in mathematics assessments is very
good and they discuss their learning with confidence. Greater attention to teaching the subject-specific language of Mathematics and increasing the emphasis on problem-solving at all levels would enhance provision for Mathematics.

- Some very good lessons were observed in Visual Arts during the evaluation. There is scope, however, for a more systematic approach to the treatment of the objectives of the visual arts curriculum at a whole-school level to ensure that pupils are exposed to a broad and balanced programme at all levels in the school.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Very good quality support is afforded to pupils with special educational needs. The holistic needs of pupils are catered for and the pupil-teacher relationship is affirming and respectful. Effective early intervention is in place and systematic support in afforded to pupils in literacy and numeracy.

- Good quality individual educational plans (IEPs) are prepared for pupils with low-incidence special educational needs. The inclusion of more specific curriculum-based objectives would enhance their quality. Parents should be provided with copies of IEPs devised for their children.

- The school is advised to increase the involvement of mainstream class teachers in dealing with pupils at the various stages of the continuum of support.

Published, October 2011