An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Maria Assumpta Junior School
Ballyphehane, Cork
Uimhir rolla: 18238J

Date of inspection: 25 November 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Maria Assumpta Junior School was undertaken in November 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in English, Irish, Mathematics and Physical Education. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>3 (2 teachers job sharing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>2 (job sharing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural Support Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision
Maria Assumpta Junior School is a girls’ infant primary school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. The school was opened in 1957 to cater for an expanding suburban area at the time. Enrolment has since declined and currently there are 74 pupils on roll. It is envisaged that the enrolment will remain stable for the foreseeable future.

The ethos of the school is guided by the strong historical connection with the Presentation Order and by Catholic values and beliefs. The school strives to build on the legacy of the religious order by providing a sound and inclusive education for the children of the parish. The mission statement declares that the school seeks to enable pupils to maximise their potential, enjoy life in school and live full lives as children. The school is designated as a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) band 2 school and is in receipt of additional resources under this scheme.

1.2 Board of management
The board of management is properly constituted and members display a clear commitment to supporting the work of the school. It is reported that meetings are convened regularly and an effective system of recording minutes has been in place since its establishment. Financial statements are presented at meetings and accounts have been audited. Some members of the board
have received training to assist them in managing of the school. While a range of tasks is shared among board members, it is suggested that further duties, particularly in the area of Health and Safety, be delegated. Good working relationships have been developed among staff, chairperson and members of the board of management. A commitment to maintaining a strong community spirit is clearly evident.

The board of management ratifies policies that are presented to them. It is advised, however, that the board review current enrolment procedures to avoid, where at all possible, the enrolment of pupils during term who have just reached their fourth birthday. In accordance with circular 32/03 pupils should not be retained at any class level except in exceptional circumstances.

The board greatly acknowledges the central role played by the principal in the efficient functioning of the school over many years of dedicated service. The board employs a part-time secretary, caretaker and two shared special needs assistants. All personnel make a valuable contribution to the work of the school. Close links and notable collaboration have also been established with the pre-school which is located on the premises.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team, comprising the principal, deputy principal and three special duties teachers serve as a valuable resource to the school. The principal, whose position has reverted to a teaching post, is very familiar with the school community and is acutely aware of the educational needs of pupils. Her leadership is characterised by a primary concern for their welfare and her commitment to developing good relationships between all members of the school community is acknowledged. This leadership style creates a positive harmonious working environment, and a culture of shared responsibility is embraced by all staff members. The principal’s role in the introduction of a wide range of initiatives to support teaching and learning is recognised. Official documents, including attendance books, roll books and registers are maintained carefully.

The principal is ably supported in the organisation of the school by a dedicated in-school management team. Their responsibilities are defined and mainly encompass administrative and organisational areas. Duties are carried out diligently and each team member makes a valuable contribution to the effective organisation of the school. Members of the in-school management team meet regularly to discuss a range of issues and make recommendations to the principal for her consideration. Very supportive working relationships exist among all members of the team. Regular staff meetings are held, minutes are maintained and decisions clearly noted. It is recommended, however, that further emphasis be placed on curricular leadership in the duties assigned to post-holders with particular attention paid to review, monitoring and coordination of curriculum areas.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
The cultivation of positive relationships between school and home is noteworthy. Staff members strive to develop the school as an open organisation and welcome parents’ participation in their children’s education. Current modes of communication include induction meetings for new parents, booklets and regular articles in the parish newsletter which informs the wider community of forthcoming events and school achievements. The teaching staff ensures regular dialogue with parents through the provision of information on their children’s progress at parent-teacher meetings and through written annual reports. A website has recently been established which will further enhance communication within the school community.
There is no parents’ association currently in place but a group is formed annually to support the work of the school. In accordance with the Education Act, consideration should now be given to the establishment of a parents’ association, affiliated to the National Parents Council. This would formalise proceedings and provide a solid structure for parental involvement. Parents are involved in fundraising, social events and in various school activities which augment pupils’ enjoyment of life at school. Parents commented favourably on the accessibility of the principal and teachers and on their openness to engage in regular consultation. They also expressed their satisfaction and gratitude to the staff for the wide range of activities that is provided in the school. While parents have been involved in the development of some school plans consideration should be now given to further extending their role in policy formulation.

1.5 Management of pupils
A positive approach to behaviour management is evident throughout the school. The staff are committed to the general welfare of pupils and manage their pastoral needs sensitively. Pupils are eager to engage in discussion, display an interest in their work and participate fully in guided and discovery-based learning. They demonstrate good levels of confidence and self-esteem. Regular assemblies acknowledge and reinforce positive behaviour and contribute to the development of pupils’ self-worth.

2. Quality of school planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The school engages in whole-school planning on a systematic basis. The school plan is devised through the collaborative activity of all staff members. Planning days and formal staff meetings have been effectively utilised to advance a range of curricular and organisational policies. Valuable use has been made of the support services to facilitate the whole-school planning process.

A wide range of administrative polices have been submitted to management and are considered official school policy. Plans, both curricular and organisational, are useful and informative and are accessible to all partners for viewing. Systematic procedures are in place to ensure ongoing review of curricular plans.

A positive feature of classroom planning is the collaborative approach at each class level. Suitable detail is evident in both long-term and short-term plans. The use of an agreed template promotes a whole-school approach to planning. Greater focus on pupils’ expected learning outcomes in terms of skill development and conceptual understanding would further promote teaching and learning throughout the school. Fortnightly schemes of work are used to record work completed. A review of this format is recommended.

2.2 Child protection policy and 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 Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (2001). Confirmation was also provided 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.
3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

**Gaeilge**

Cuirtear plean uile-scoile ar fáil le haghaidh foghlaíom agus teagasc na Gaeilge. Tá feidhmeanna teanga agus téamaí rianaithe sa cháipéis seo ach b' fhiú, anois, athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an bplean, na téamaí ach go háirithe, chun a chinntiú go bhfuil teanga na ndaltaí á forbaírt go cuí ó rang go rang.

Cothafonn na hoidí dearadh dearfach i leith na Gaeilge agus baíneann na daltaí taitneamh as an bhfoghlaim. Tá réimse leathan d'acrannann teagaisc ar fáil agus leagtar bheim chréididúnach ar phrionta Gaeilge i dtimpeallacht na scoile. Baintear úsúil as an nGaeilge mar theanga bhainisteoireachta ranga i gcuid de na ranganna. Moltar an dea-nós seo a leathnú tríd an scoil.

Múintear go leor amhráin agus rainn chun fuaimneanna agus rithim na teanga a chur ar chluasa na ndaltaí. Cothaitear scileanna éisteachta go córasach trí thascanna oiriúnacha a eagruithe i ranganna áirithe. Léiriúonn roinn daltaí cumas maith tuisceana. Ní mór, áfach, bheim níos mó a leagan ar fhóirbairt scil na h-éisteachta. B'fhiú cur chuige uile-scoile a aontú maidir le feidhm na scéalalóchtachta agus na fíolócht u bhfoghlaim agus i saibhriú teanga na ndaltaí. Chuige sin, moltar réimse níos leithne de leabhair scéalta agus ábhar léitheoireachta a dholair.

I móran ranganna baintear feidhm le héifeacht as straitéisé úsáideachta ar nós cluichí, rólímiirt, drámaíocht agus obair le puipéid chun eiseamláiri teanga a mhúineadh agus Chun foclóirí agus struchtúr na teanga a dhaingnimithe. Tá sé ar chú inneachtaí a chur ar fáil ar feidhm. Ní mór, áfach, bheim le níos mó a cheannaimh bréime a chur i gcoinne. Léirithe a thabhairt do na daltaí a chleachtadh i gcumhthéascanna cumarsáideacha.

**Irish**

A whole-school plan for the teaching and learning of Irish is presented. Language exemplars and themes are outlined in the plan. It is advised, however, that the plan be reviewed, particularly the content of the themes, to ensure that pupils’ language ability is being developed and extended from class to class.

A positive attitude to Irish is fostered among pupils and they enjoy learning the language. A wide range of resources is available and creditable emphasis is placed on print in Irish in the school environs. Continuous use is made of incidental Irish in some classes and this good practice should be further extended throughout the school.

Poems and rhymes are taught to familiarise pupils with the sound and structure of the language. In a number of classes listening skills are systematically taught through a range of activities. Some pupils display a good understanding of the language. Greater emphasis should now be placed on the formal development of pupils’ listening skills on a whole-school basis. The importance of story and poetry in the acquisition and enrichment of language should be considered at a whole-school level. To this end, a wider range of story books in Irish and other appropriate reading material should be provided.
In many classes suitable language exemplars are taught and effective strategies are used such as language games, role play and puppetry to consolidate the learning. Some pupils have the ability to ask and answer questions confidently and structure simple sentences. To further enhance pupils’ language skills and fluency, it is recommended that additional emphasis be placed on the communicative approach, on correct pronunciations and on the provision of greater opportunities for pupils to use the language in communicative contexts.

**English**

A comprehensive whole-school plan for English has been developed with clear delineation of content. Teachers place due emphasis on oral language development during reading and writing activities. Pupils are exposed to a wide range of rhyme and poetry. Role-play, talk and discussion are utilised to good effect and skilful use is made of story for focused language enrichment. The ACHIEV (Activities for Children Involving Everyday Vocabulary) programme provides additional opportunities for pupils to practise everyday words through purposeful activities. Language, in some classes, is also appropriately explored and developed through cross-curricular approaches. However, greater emphasis should now be placed on the development of pupils’ language skills through the discrete oral language lesson using an agreed whole-school oral language programme.

Commendably, there has been a concerted effort by staff to improve literacy standards in the school. Suitable emphasis is placed on reading readiness, and developmental activities such as knowledge of the conventions of print, basic sight vocabulary and word identification strategies are judiciously explored. Stimulating print-rich environments and word wall displays contribute to the development of pupils’ reading competence. The systematic development of phonological and phonemic awareness and the skilful use of large-format books clearly assist the emergent reader. The introduction of a wide range of good quality differentiated reading materials used during the Literacy Lift-Off and shared reading programmes further enhance the development of pupils’ reading skills. Some pupils read with a good degree of fluency and accuracy. There is clear evidence of the positive impact of carefully structured reading approaches on pupil progress. It is advised, however, that the implementation of literacy programmes should be more appropriately adapted to meet the identified learning needs of pupils. In the implementation of the Literacy Lift-Off programme consideration should be given to the allocation of additional time at the various teaching stations. To further enhance this work focused targets of learning should be identified and shared with all personnel involved in this provision. The creation of a story corner within the school further promotes pupil enjoyment of reading. The purposeful use of ICT in the delivery of the English programme merits acknowledgement.

Early writing is stimulated through the teacher acting as scribe and modelling writing. Pupils engage in a range of functional writing activities and are also provided with worthwhile opportunities to write in different genres. Well-structured writing lessons where pupils are stimulated to write and systematically taught specific strategies are noteworthy features of the whole-school writing programme. Worthwhile writing activities such as daily news, letters and story demonstrate pupils’ ability to write in an age-appropriate register of language.

Handwriting is taught conscientiously. A keen emphasis is placed on the development of pupils’ letter formation through the use of a specific penmanship programme. Some pupils, however, are experiencing difficulties with the conventions of print. In this context, it is suggested that the current approach to teaching hand writing skills be reviewed in an effort to develop greater accuracy in letter formation and correct usage. While the presentation of written work is very good in some classes, this effective practice should be extended to all classroom settings.
3.2 Mathematics
Mathematics-rich environments are created with relevant number facts and charts attractively displayed. Appropriate emphasis is placed on developing pupils’ understanding of key concepts through the regular use of concrete materials and immediate environment. The development of pupils’ mathematical vocabulary is given due attention. Early mathematical activities are carefully taught and the use of rhyme and number games is a positive feature of learning. While very good emphasis is placed on oral work in some classes, it is advised that all pupils be provided with further opportunities to engage in oral computation exercises. It is also recommended that a balanced programme of work be delivered which incorporates all strands and strand units of the curriculum. Purposeful and regular reinforcement of mathematical concepts would further augment pupil achievement in this area of learning. In instances where most of the written work is undertaken in mathematics’ books, it is advised that pupils be provided with regular opportunities to record work in their own copybooks. The presentation of this work is commendable in some classes and is a positive feature of learning that should be extended throughout the school.

3.3 Physical Education
External tutors are employed to teach aspects of the physical education programme including Irish dance, basketball and tennis. Lessons observed were suitably structured and pupils were purposefully engaged. It is suggested, however, that skills taught during these sessions should be reinforced by teachers in follow-up activities. Pupils engage enthusiastically in the Bean Bag programme which actively promotes pupils’ skills in games and dance. These activities provide valuable opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively.

The provision of a wide range of carefully maintained resources enhances the delivery of the physical education programme. Lessons are well organised and pupils are provided with opportunities to engage in games that promote their participation and enjoyment. Clear direction is given and pupils are encouraged to use space and equipment in an appropriate manner. Lessons are suitably structured to allow for some development of skills. It is recommended, however, that greater emphasis be placed on teaching specific skills across a wider range of strands.

3.4 Assessment
Assessment practices are well-established in the school. Pupils’ progress is assessed regularly through a variety of approaches including the correction of work, the administration of teacher-designed tasks, reading logs, checklists and portfolios of work. Reading, writing and mathematical indicators are also used productively. Screening tests are administered to facilitate early identification of pupils’ learning difficulties. A number of valuable assessment strategies are used to identify those pupils who may require additional support followed by the administration of diagnostic tests when necessary.

Teachers maintain careful records of the outcomes of all assessments and results are shared between class teachers and support teachers. Commendable work has been done in collating test results as part of the DEIS initiative. Parents are informed of their children’s progress at annual parent-teacher meetings and through the issuing of progress reports. Structures are in place to ensure that progress records are transferred with pupils when they leave the school. It is advised, however, that greater use be made of assessment data to further identify areas of need and to plan accordingly on a whole-school basis.
4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
One shared learning-support post is allocated to the school and is filled through a job-sharing arrangement. Supplementary support for pupils with special educational needs is also provided by a part-time resource/language support teacher. Support is provided mainly in the area of literacy with a small number of pupils accessing support in numeracy. Tuition is primarily on a withdrawal basis individually or in small groups. Early intervention occurs in the area of language, with a focus on the development of phonological awareness for one infant class. Consideration should now be given to providing additional in-class support to other classes where specific needs have been identified particularly in the areas of numeracy and language.

A supportive and stimulating environment is created. Lessons are well-structured and judicious use is made of a range of appropriate resources to support pupil learning. Teachers productively employ a variety of teaching approaches which are adapted to suit the learning needs of pupils. In general, comprehensive individual educational programmes (IEPs) and individual profile and learning programmes (IPLPs) have been devised for pupils in receipt of support. In some instances, however, there is a need to redefine targets to ensure that objectives are specific to pupils’ learning needs. A more systematic approach to detailing and recording pupil progress and their achievement of learning targets is also necessary. Support teachers engage regularly in consultation with mainstream class teachers and with parents. It is advised, however, that regular formal meetings of the support team be convened to ensure collaboration and co-ordination of practice that will benefit all pupils. Every effort should be made to minimise the number of teachers that support any one individual pupil.

Two special needs assistants (SNA), who job share, assist pupils access the curriculum in a mainstream setting in a most supportive manner. Good practices are in evidence with regard to ongoing communication with all partners, the development of pupils’ independence and detailed recording of the days’ activities. It is advised that further clarification should be provided with regard to the maintenance of data and records.

5.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
The school is involved in a number of Department of Education and Skills initiatives aimed at providing additional support to schools participating in the DEIS programme. A comprehensive DEIS plan has been prepared to link positively with other curricular plans and policies. Action plans have been devised in an effort to raise standards in literacy and numeracy. Parents’ views on the work of the school have also been surveyed, the results of which are very positive and supportive of teachers’ endeavours. A comprehensive annual report is also prepared.

The Home School Community Liaison programme (HSCL) commendably seeks to maximise cooperation between parents and the school. Current practice contributes significantly in progressing this partnership through the development of supportive linkages between home, school and selected agencies. Parental involvement in the life of the school is actively promoted and parents engage enthusiastically in a range of school-based activities. Of particular note is the participation of parents in cookery classes which has proven to be highly successful. The involvement of both parents and pupils in the development of a school garden with the support of an external expert is also noteworthy. Further innovative approaches such as the Story Sacks initiative are currently being prepared. Home-visits are routinely conducted and a variety of
courses are organised to promote parents own personal skills including FETAC courses in child care, computers and leisure.

Pupils benefit considerably from the provision of the Reading Recovery programme where high quality support is provided in overcoming reading difficulties. Pupils are skilfully taught to read with emphasis placed on enjoyment and success.

The school also deploys a support teacher who has a particular remit for the promotion and management of positive behaviour. This well-structured programme benefits a number of pupils for whom an IEP has been prepared with clear targets formulated to develop their social and academic needs. Detailed progress records are maintained. A wide range of strategies is productively employed during sessions. Pupils’ confidence and self-esteem are developed in a conscientious manner and emphasis is placed on the development of pupils’ ability to work with others. Literacy and numeracy skills are also targeted as a means of developing positive attitudes to learning and appropriate behaviour within the classroom context. Resources are judiciously employed to encourage pupil participation. Pupils who avail of this support display varying abilities. In this regard it is advised to further differentiate targets and incorporate an element of in-class support in the delivery of this service. Furthermore, it would be considered appropriate to integrate this service more fully with the learning support and resource teaching model.

The School Completion Programme provides a range of supports for a select number of pupils. Emphasis is placed on art, craft and music activities. Commendably pupil progress is discussed and evaluated among relevant school personnel. Other activities include after-school Fun Club and summer camp. These programmes creditably support the school in the provision of an extensive range of activities which aids pupils’ holistic development. In the further development of this initiative, it would be worthwhile to align the activities of this service with whole-school plans for relevant curricular areas.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is characterised by a welcoming, caring and well-ordered stimulating school environment where pupils enjoy learning.
- The commitment of the board of management to the ongoing development of the school is praiseworthy.
- The principal and teaching staff are commended for their dedication and commitment to the provision of positive educational experiences for pupils.
- Pupils are very responsive and participate with enthusiasm in all learning activities.
- Ancillary staff contribute positively to the overall effectiveness of the school.
- The engagement of parents in many aspects of school life is highly commendable.
- The school is very well resourced and has a wide range of educational equipment to support the delivery of the curriculum.
- A strong sense of community greatly enhances the work of the school.
- Very good collaboration between the pre-school and the junior school facilitates the transfer of pupils with ease.
The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

- It is advised that the board review current enrolment procedures to avoid, in so far as possible, the enrolment of pupils during term who have just reached their fourth birthday and to ensure that children progress to the next class at the end of each year except in exceptional circumstances in accordance with Circular 32/03.
- Moltar athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an bplean scoile sa Ghaeilge agus é a chur i bhfeidhm chun a chinntiú go dtagann forbairt chórasach ar chumas labhartha na ndaltaí. (A review of the plan for Irish and its implementation is necessary to ensure that pupils’ language competence is further developed.)
- It is recommended that structured programmes in literacy and in handwriting be more accurately adapted to meet pupils’ learning needs and further advance their achievement in these areas.
- The implementation of a discrete oral language programme on a whole-school basis with due consideration to the language needs of pupils is recommended.
- Teachers are advised to place greater emphasis on skill development across all strands of the Physical Education programme.
- A more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of additional support for pupils with special educational needs is recommended.
- The formalisation of parental involvement through the establishment of a parents’ association should be advanced.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and the board of management where the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
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 acknowledges and commends the Inspectorate for recognising the dedication and commitment of the staff in providing such a well resourced, caring and stimulating learning environment for the young pupils.

The Board evaluated the question of the appointment of a Health & Safety Officer from the Board. They considered it imperative that the person appointed be on the premises every day and that the appointee would be responsible and vigilant. Such an appointment has taken place with immediate effect.

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

1. The enrolment policy has been amended as recommended.
2. Additional Irish Resources have been purchased and utilised.
3. The staff will look at modifications to be made to existing structured and individualised programmes in Literacy and Handwriting.
4. The existing English oral language programme has been further enhanced by the introduction of a discreet oral language period.
5. A more formal system of selection of supports for pupils with special educational needs will be implemented.
6. The Parents Support Group were consulted at a meeting held on Oct 14th 2010 with regard to the establishment of a Parents Association affiliated to the N.P.C. They deemed it unsuitable to the needs of the school, coming at this time, so declined an offer to joint the National Parents Council.