Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál
Green Lane, Carlow
Uimhir rolla: 18363M

Date of inspection: 2 February 2012
1. Introduction

Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál is an all-girls primary school in Carlow Town. It is a vibrant school in which a very positive learning environment has been created. The pupil cohort is mixed, in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity. A significant number of pupils speak English as a second language. Attendance rates in the school have improved on foot of the development of an attendance strategy. In questionnaires administered for the evaluation, almost every parent and pupil rated Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál as a good school. During the whole-school evaluation, inspectors observed teaching and learning in eleven mainstream classes and in five support-teaching settings. 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.

The school building has recently been upgraded, extended and refurbished to a high standard.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The quality of administrative and curriculum leadership offered by the principal and the in-school management team is very good.
- The pupils are very well behaved, courteous and engaged in their learning.
- The quality of planning at whole-school level and at individual teacher level is good.
- The school provides a highly-stimulating learning environment, where pupils’ work is celebrated.
- The overall quality of teaching in the school is commendable; the development of the pupils’ English writing skills being a particular strength.
- The quality of teaching in Science is very good.
- Very strong emphasis is placed on the holistic development of the pupil. The quality of work completed in Music and Art is excellent.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- Tá gá le haird sa bhreis a dhíriú ar scileanna scirbhneoireachta chruthaitheach na ndaltaí sa Ghaeilge a fheabhsú. *Further attention to the improvement of the pupils’ creative writing skills in Irish is advised.*
- An integrated, cross-curricular, whole-school approach to the development of the pupils’ problem solving skills is required.
- A review of the current configuration for support teaching, to ensure a greater focus on early intervention, is advised.

3. Quality of School Management
• The Board of Management operates effectively, concerning itself with the strategic direction of the school. Significant time has been spent in the recent past on the school’s building project. Individual board members contributed significantly to the project. The current cohort of pupils enjoys the fruit of their labours. Members are involved purposefully in the development and review of policies.

• The quality of leadership and management offered by the principal and in-school management (ISM) team is one of the school’s main strengths. A person of significant professional credibility, the principal is a very effective instructional leader who has a clear vision for the school. This is shared by members of staff and is enacted on a day to day basis in the school. The commitment of staff members to the school, to the pupils and their welfare is evident and a very positive school climate results. Members of the ISM team work diligently and the outcomes of many aspects of their work are evident in the school e.g. improved attendance rates and a fourth Green Flag.

• The quality of the management of resources in the school is excellent. Specific and commendable efforts have been made to ensure the provision of a high quality learning environment. Each classroom has interactive technology which is used to good effect in lessons.

• The management of pupils in the school is very good. The pupils appear very happy and are courteous and confident learners. Interactions between teachers and pupils are very positive. Pupils are suitably encouraged to participate in learning activities.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

• The quality of the school planning and school self-evaluation process is good. It is evident that planning in the school is a collaborative process. A comprehensive range of administrative policies underpins practice in the school. Structures and practices to support individual teacher planning have evolved and improved in recent times. Teachers collaborate to very good effect in compiling long term and short term schemes for their classes. This is high quality work which facilitates monitoring of curriculum implementation.

• An annual report on the school’s work and developments on school priorities is prepared for the board of management and for parents.

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

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

• The quality of overall teaching, learning and pupil achievement is good. A good balance between whole-class activities and group activities is achieved. Purposeful use of ICTs is evident throughout the school. The pupils demonstrate very good listening skills. Questionnaire results confirm that pupils enjoy their learning. Teachers present lessons well; objectives are clear and appropriate and the lessons are delivered at a good pace. Very good questioning techniques were observed. Integration of lessons is a feature of good practice in the school.

• The pupils collaborate to complete a range of project work in a number of curriculum areas. Some of this is of a very high standard. It is recommended, however, that the
pupils are taught specific research skills, including, *inter alia*, analysing evidence, making deductions and presenting and defending completed work.


The quality of the teaching of oral Irish throughout the school is very good. Very good use is made of Irish in day-to-day events and as a management tool in the classrooms. It is evident that most of the pupils enjoy their Irish lessons. They have learned a broad vocabulary and they recite rhymes, songs and poems capably. Good use is made of group work, of puppets and of pair work as teaching methodologies. Though the pupils are afforded opportunities to complete writing exercises, it is now recommended that they receive more opportunities to compose their own writing and to place further emphasis on creative writing. Similarly, the teachers are advised to provide a greater range of reading materials.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in English is commendable. Work in this area is particularly impressive given the range of challenges presented; including pupils with little or no English on enrolment and, in a small number of cases, pupils with poorly-developed language skills. The quality of resources available to support literacy teaching is very good. Teaching inputs are focused on developing specific skills and this is done expertly. The approach to the development of the pupils’ writing skills is excellent. The pupils are taught to edit very effectively, to write for different audiences and in different genres and to take pride in their presentation of this work.

- Good emphasis is placed on the development of the pupils' comprehension skills. This could be enhanced by placing more emphasis on the systematic development of the pupils’ higher order thinking skills and problem solving skills.

- Emergent reading skills are well catered for and a school-wide programme of individualised reading is planned. This should further support pupils’ engagement with reading. Assessment is used effectively to determine the composition of reading groups in most classes. Pupils' reading skills are good and in that regard, a very good balance is achieved between traditional teaching approaches and the facilitation of pupils learning. The pupils have been taught a very good range of poetry. Standards achieved on literacy tests have been steadily improving in recent years.

- The quality of teaching in Mathematics is good. There is good evidence of group work with individual pupils’ work being very well monitored and supported. Technology is used to very good effect in supporting lessons. Manipulatives and support materials are used well during lessons. Very good emphasis on regular assessment is noted.

- Pupils in senior classes are streamed for Mathematics. This provides good evidence of the teachers addressing priority areas in the school and devising a strategic response. As outlined below, a reconfiguration of aspects of support teaching with a focus on early intervention may, in time, obviate the need for streaming.
• The quality of learning and pupil achievement in Mathematics for most pupils is good. The attention paid to improving the pupils' mental mathematical skills is very good. Standardised test results indicate that most pupils are progressing well in many aspects of the mathematics curriculum. In particular, the pupils demonstrate good understanding of number and are very comfortable with computation. The school has correctly identified word problem solving as the most significant challenge facing the pupils in Mathematics. To that end, all teachers endeavour to include aspects of problem solving tasks in their lessons. A whole-school systematic response to the development of the pupils' problem solving skills is required. The current approach should be broadened to include planned problem-solving activities in other curriculum areas.

• The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in Science is very good. The pupils are suitably challenged and an excellent array of resources is used in presenting lessons. The pupils demonstrate very good ability to present and discuss completed work. They demonstrate good scientific knowledge and excellent environmental awareness. The pupils' ability to apply learning to everyday life is very good. The school participates in a range of programmes that support the pupils' acquisition of scientific knowledge. The pupils, justifiably, are proud of their achievements in activities such as The Green Flag, FÍS and Discover Primary Science programmes.

• Assessment practices in the school are very good. Pupils' progress is carefully monitored. The teachers are deserving of significant praise for the rigorous manner in which pupils' learning in non-core subject areas is monitored. Pupils in many classes undergo regular testing in, inter alia, History, Science and PE. It is also evident that the results of assessment tests are used effectively to inform teacher planning, resulting in the provision of differentiated programmes of work.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

• This is an open, welcoming school. There is a great sense of care for the pupils' welfare evident. There are very good links with a range of external agencies. Resources have been deployed to ensure as positive an engagement with education as possible. These include the provision of a breakfast club and lunch for pupils. Communications and interactions between the school and home are very good. These include a very informative website, blogs, an annual report and regular parent teacher meetings.

• The quality of teaching approaches and interventions for pupils with special educational needs and for EAL pupils is good. Education plans for individuals and groups are provided. Further consideration to including specific targets for all learners in support settings would be beneficial. It is also recommended, that the current configuration of support to pupils be reviewed. This should seek to strike a better balance between remediation programmes and preventative, early intervention programmes. Early intervention should be designed for a very particular purpose with specific targets built in.
Appendix

School response to the report
Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The positivity and affirmation so evident in the report are welcomed by the Board as testament to the dedication, diligence, expertise, professionalism and teamwork of our staff.

We are delighted by the broad focus of the report which took an all-encompassing view of the work of the school.

We especially welcome the praise for the vibrant, welcoming, inclusive atmosphere where pupils are nurtured and encouraged. We are particularly pleased that the inspectors noted the very strong emphasis on the holistic development of our pupils and the great sense of care for pupils’ welfare. We fully endorse their observation that our pupils appear very happy and are courteous and confident learners.

Equally we take pride in our excellent academic environment, our monitoring of progress and our provision of support. We welcome the report’s commendation of the high academic standards that are expected and achieved in our school.

It is particularly pleasing to have the school’s success in improving attendance rates noted. So too, the affirmation of assessment practices and the provision of differentiated programmes of work.

The Board and Principal would particularly like to acknowledge the staff’s excellent preparation of individual planning, their full commitment to the process and the collaborative nature by which this is achieved. This total engagement with the planning process, initiated in Sept. 2011, has resulted in a cohesive, focused, strategic approach to class work, reflected in the robust acknowledgement by the inspectorate of high quality teaching and learning in the school.

We are extremely proud of our school and congratulate the staff, parents and pupils on receiving this excellent report which we feel they truly merit. We also appreciate the acknowledgement of the work and the contribution of the Board.

We wish to thank the team of inspectors for their courteous, supportive and professional manner in which they carried out the Whole School Evaluation and for their engagement in professional dialogue.
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 welcomes the findings and recommendations of the report.

It is encouraging that, as part of our self-evaluation process, two of the three recommendations had already been identified and targeted by the school, namely, problem solving and a reconfiguring of support.

The school had already targeted problem solving in Maths. Since the inspection, we have introduced *Problem of the Week* and intend devising and implementing a cross-curricular problem solving strategy with input from the various core groups.

Regarding the reconfiguration of support, six members of staff have since attended a seminar on the Reading Recovery programme (formerly available only in DEIS schools) and we have applied for training in the programme.

We look forward to implementing the third recommendation, namely, improvement of creative writing skills in Irish, and note it reflects the report’s finding of a very high standard in the teaching of oral Irish.

The Board will continue to support the staff in implementing the recommendations effectively.