An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Joseph’s NS
Halverstown
Kilcullen
Co. Kildare

Uimhir rolla: 18378C

Date of inspection: 4 November 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Joseph’s NS, Halverstown 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 Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). 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

St Joseph’s NS is a two-teacher school in the townland of Halverstown, Co. Kildare. The original school was constructed in 1959. Recently, the entire community worked tirelessly to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary which culminated in the official opening of the new extension in September 2009. The board of management, staff and parents are commended for their work on the construction of two new classrooms and on the refurbishment of the original building. Both members of the teaching staff have recently returned from extended leave. Enrolment figures have remained constant over the past number of years but are expected to increase in the immediate future. Pupil attendance levels are good.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The school is under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin. It has a Catholic ethos and this informs all its policies and procedures. It aims to welcome and cherish each child in its care and to promote the full and harmonious development of all pupils. The school endeavours to foster a strong sense of community and to create good lines of communication between management, teachers, parents and pupils. The small number of pupils and families associated with the school allow for particularly close bonds to be formed.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and meets every four to six weeks. It is evident from the meetings associated with this evaluation and from observations during the inspection that the board is enthusiastic, committed and acquainted with all necessary administrative, organisational, financial and legal aspects of school management. It manages the school efficiently and is highly supportive of the work of the teachers. Board members have attended training. Roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined and assigned duties are undertaken.
effectively. Board members are supportive of the school’s mission and ethos. Finances are carefully managed and accounts are regularly audited. Available finances are used effectively and the board’s decisions lead to clear improvements in the school environment. The school is very well-equipped with a wide range of resources to support learning and teaching. The board has invested in technology and the school is working towards achieving Digital Schools status.

Minutes of board meetings are maintained. The principal presents a report at each meeting to ensure that the board is informed at all times on day-to-day events in the school. Board members are actively involved in the whole-school planning process and decision-making procedures are transparent. Plans and policies are discussed, approved and ratified at meetings. Policies are reviewed regularly and updated to reflect legislative requirements.

1.3 In-school management
The in-school management team consists of the principal and one special duties post-holder. The teaching principal manages the day-to-day organisation of the school in an enthusiastic effective and efficient manner. She is dedicated to the development of the school and is supported by the school staff, board of management and parents. Administrative and organisational tasks are undertaken with care. The high levels of co-operation between the principal and special duties post-holder ensure a positive, purposeful learning climate within the school. Duties currently assigned to the special duties post-holder are carried out diligently. It is recommended that duties attaching to the post be enshrined in a written contract and be subject to review in the context of Circular 07/03 of the Department of Education and Science as the needs of the school evolve. It is also recommended that the School Register be updated immediately and maintained consistently thereafter.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
A strong sense of community is evident in the school, and the board of management and teachers strive to foster effective communication between all the partners. The school has an enthusiastic and supportive parent-teachers’ association. Parents are positively encouraged to communicate with the school about their children’s progress and opportunities to consult with teachers are readily available. Formal parent-teacher meetings are held annually. Parents are actively involved in the school-planning process and they support all school activities. The recent celebration of the school’s fiftieth anniversary has fostered greater communication with the wider community.

1.5 Management of pupils
The quality of pupil management is very good. The pupils respond positively to the encouragement of the school staff. Senior pupils look after younger pupils. This makes for a helpful and considerate atmosphere where kindness and thoughtfulness are seen as routine features and where pupils take pride in acting as responsible role models. Pupils are keen to learn and levels of behaviour and discipline are very good.

2. Quality of school planning
2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
The quality of whole-school planning is good. The school has availed of the services of a number of cuiditheoirí and their support and advice has contributed positively to the planning process. Policies required by legislation have been drawn up and ratified by the board of management and show evidence of being developed as a result of collaboration between the board, the teachers and the parents. The key policies are shared with parents when new pupils are enrolled.
Curricular policies have been developed for all subject areas. As they are reviewed, it is recommended that they be further adapted to the particular context of the school, reflecting the multi-grade nature of mainstream classes. Further development of areas of the English policy such as the approach to process writing is recommended.

The quality of classroom planning is good. Both teachers devise long and short-term planning which covers all curricular areas. The short-term planning template also serves to record monthly progress. In order to ensure that all aspects of each curricular subject are covered adequately, and that programmes are differentiated effectively for the senior pupils in both classrooms, the use of curriculum objectives in short-term planning is recommended.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Science Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 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

It is clear that a positive approach to Irish is cultivated. The teachers make great efforts to create this favourable atmosphere in the school and in the classrooms with charts, labels and suitable pictures. The language is used regularly as a language of communication and in classroom management.
The communicative approach is used in teaching Irish. Toys, pictures and many other resources are employed to develop understanding and to promote Irish. Emphasis is placed on the development of the pupils’ listening and speaking skills, particularly in the junior classes. It is clear that the pupils enjoy the organised activities. In spite of that, however, pupils in the senior classes do not have much competence or confidence in using Irish. It is recommended that they be encouraged to speak more by further use of the various strategies advocated in the curriculum. The staff intend to use more drama to increase the pupils’ confidence and this initiative is commended.

Formal grammar is taught regularly in the senior classes. The progress in reading is fair. Overall, there is a need to place greater emphasis on learning objectives in short-term planning and in practice to cater for the needs of pupils in terms of broadening vocabulary, composing sentences and communicating.

**English**

Pupils’ oral language skills are expanded during a range of talk and discussion activities across the curriculum. A wide variety of teaching methodologies is used to develop receptive and expressive skills in English. The pupils recite a selection of nursery rhymes and poems enthusiastically. In order to ensure breadth and balance, a more deliberate focus on discrete oral language activities throughout the school is recommended.

In reading, pupils in the infant and junior classes are introduced to conventions of print, basic sight vocabulary and word identification skills, while phonological and phonemic awareness are promoted. Reading skills are developed further in the senior classes. Pupils show an interest in books and an enjoyment of reading and some read fluently. Novels and a variety of other reading materials are used in both classrooms. Dictionary skills are of a high standard. Further opportunities for discussion of reading materials, as well as exposure to the necessary vocabulary to enable pupils to discuss what they have read, will enhance the work being done in this area. The school is very fortunate in having a well-stocked and easily accessible library and pupils have a wide range of reference books to consult for research purposes.

Writing skills are suitably developed in all classes and pupils are encouraged to write in a variety of genres for different purposes and for different audiences. Written work is regularly monitored by the teachers. Further development of process writing should now be considered.

**3.2 Mathematics**

In general, lesson content in Mathematics is presented clearly with appropriate questioning and pupils are enthusiastic about their work. Emphasis is placed on active learning methodologies and the school’s wide range of mathematical equipment and resources, together with information and communication technology, are used to support teaching and learning. A satisfactory standard of presentation is achieved in all classes with pupils recording their work accurately and neatly.

A number of pupils in the senior classes, however, experience difficulty with a range of mathematical concepts. While the challenging task involved in teaching a number of class levels in the multi-class situation is acknowledged, it is recommended that the teachers ensure that all pupils are challenged appropriately. This can be achieved by being cognisant of the learning outcomes stated in the curriculum for each class level. Teachers’ planning should incorporate differentiated approaches to a much greater degree in order to cater for pupils of various abilities.
3.3 Social, Personal and Health Education
A good programme of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is delivered in this school. The teachers implement the SPHE curriculum as a core curricular subject and afford ample attention to the content. Issues related to personal health and safety, friendship and bullying, healthy eating and growth and development are covered. Positive, respectful classroom climates allow for the employment of a range of active learning approaches. Pupils are encouraged and affirmed. Opportunities are availed of to integrate learning in SPHE with other subject areas. In their study of media education the pupils recently explored and used some simple video production techniques to produce their own documentary.

3.4 Assessment
A range of assessment modes is used in the school. Records of standardised tests are maintained and the results have been analysed to inform teachers and parents and to identify pupils who may need supplementary teaching. The school’s system for tracking each pupil’s progress as they advance from class to class is highly commended. Reports are issued to parents at the end of the academic year.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs
A newly-appointed learning-support teacher, who is based in St Patrick’s NS, Newbridge, provides support on a daily basis for a number of pupils identified with learning difficulties. The school has access to a wide range of diagnostic tests. A variety of resources appropriate to the needs, abilities and learning styles of the pupils is also available. Currently all support is on a withdrawal basis.

Very effective individual education plans have been compiled and copies have been distributed to class teachers and to parents. They are based on data from assessment reports, consultation with class teachers, parents and, where appropriate, the pupils themselves. Realistic targets are set and monitored. Comprehensive written records of progress are maintained and show that pupils with special educational needs are making very good progress towards the outcomes and curriculum targets identified within their individual education plans.

In view of the large proportion of pupils who are in need of learning support, it is recommended that the school explores the use of in-class support in order to facilitate the implementation of shared teaching approaches involving class teachers and the learning-support teacher.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
The quality of support for disadvantaged pupils is very good. The inclusive environment of the school ensures that all pupils have equality of access to the full range of school activities. The school prides itself on its ability to reflect life as a large family and cares for every pupil in a holistic way which is underpinned by the school’s ethos.

5. CONCLUSION
The school has strengths in the following areas:
• The board of management is totally committed to managing the repair, upkeep and maintenance of the school building. Members are interested in supporting and enhancing the quality of education provided and they have a responsible attitude towards ensuring that a wide range of resources and materials are available for teaching and learning.

• The school is a key focal point in the local rural community. A warm and welcoming family atmosphere pervades all activities. It is a centre for the development of a vibrant community spirit in the area.

• There is a sense of collegiality, support and high morale among the staff. Their dedication to the school and to the children in their care, coupled with their strong work ethic, helps to ensure an environment where pupils enjoy learning and where their holistic development is fostered.

• The pupils present as happy and positive. They are respectful and friendly and display confidence in their interactions with peers and teachers. They participate eagerly in all aspects of school life and there is a sense of fun and enjoyment in the classrooms.

• Parents are very supportive of the work of the school and play an active role in the organisation of a range of extra-curricular activities.

• The quality of planning and the supplementary support provided for pupils with additional learning needs is very high.

The following key recommendations are made in order to further improve the quality of education provided by the school:

• To ensure that teaching and learning in the school challenges all pupils to succeed to the best of their ability, particularly in the multi-class situation, a greater emphasis on the use of curriculum objectives in planning and on differentiation is recommended both in individual teacher preparation and in classroom practice.

• It is advised that following the period of change the school has recently undergone in terms of staffing, emphasis should be placed in the short-term on the implementation of the core subject areas and on ensuring that pupils have acquired the key concepts and skills advocated in the curriculum.

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.

Published, November 2010
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

St. Joseph’s National School has begun the 2010-2011 school year with optimism and energy: new enrolments have brought the total number of students to 37, an increase of 32% since last year. A conservative projection of enrolment figures for next year suggests the school will qualify for a third teacher in 2012-2013. In the past year the school achieved the “Discover Primary Science and Maths” award for the third year running. We have now fulfilled most of the requirements for achieving Digital School status. Our students have access to 13 laptops, 2 interactive whiteboards, a visualiser and audiovisual recording equipment and pupils in both senior and junior rooms are competent and relaxed with educational technology as part of their daily learning experience. In the coming year we plan to enter the Young Scientist Competition for the second time. This year we will be conducting a survey comparing means of transport past and present.

The start of last year when our whole school evaluation was carried out was a time of significant transition for our school: the move to our new classrooms was completed in early September. At the end of September, the whole school community put huge effort into the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the school and most significantly, both of our teaching staff had just returned from extended leave, the principal returning to work just two weeks before the evaluation.

We were very pleased that the report recognised the individual attention we give to each of our students. Our small numbers allow us not only to foster a family-like atmosphere of mutual support and respect across the age groups and between staff, pupils and the wider community, but also allows us to attend to the individual emotional and academic needs of each of our children. The report highlighted our strength in care of pupils with special educational needs and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. We are now extending our policy on special educational needs to meet the very specific needs of children who have exceptional academic ability. These children can easily fail to reach their maximum potential without specific support. We are drafting school policy and practise in this area and will be implementing this in the coming school year.

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

We have noted the suggestion that pupils be encouraged to speak more Irish and at Christmas 2009 and summer 2010 the children presented simple plays as Gaelige. In the coming year we
will be working to further increase competence and confidence in the Irish language through events, dramas and programmes of activity.

In November 2009, we introduced team teaching in Maths in both senior and junior classes. The success of this strategy was reflected in the very significant improvement across the board in Maths scores from standardised tests administered in June 2010.

As acknowledged in the report, the WSE was carried out at a time of transition for our school but has helped us focus our attention on specific areas for improvement which we have now successfully addressed and developed as particular strengths. Overall the school is continuing to progress well in our goal of becoming a centre of excellence in education.