Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Náisiúnta Mhuire na Toirbhíre
Carrick on Shannon, County Leitrim
Uimhir rolla: 18822S

Date of inspection: 11 November 2010
1. Introduction

Scoil Náisiúnta Mhuire na Toirbhírte is a mainstream senior boys’ primary school accommodating pupils from second to sixth class. The school, under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, has a diverse and multicultural enrolment including a significant cohort of pupils for whom English is an additional language. Currently, there are 77 pupils enrolled. During the evaluation, there were seven teachers on staff; four permanent and three temporary. Two further teachers visit the school in support roles.

The school participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS, Urban Band 2) and in the School Completion Programme; action plans of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion. The school liaises closely with the National Educational Welfare Board regarding pupil attendance. However, school attendance remains an area of significant concern with a number of pupils having poor attendance patterns. For example, during the week of the evaluation, a significant number of pupils were absent from school. Provision for English, Irish, Mathematics and Science was inspected during this whole-school evaluation. 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The school is well managed by a hard-working board of management and promotes interculturalism and inclusion.
- The principal works in a highly dedicated and efficient manner and is supported by an enthusiastic in-school management team.
- Mainstream and support teachers work in a diligent, talented and earnest manner.
- Provision for Mathematics and Science is good and recent developments in the teaching of English appear promising.
- In the main, parents are supportive of the school and believe it to provide a good education for their children. During the evaluation, the pupils proved themselves to be well behaved and eager to learn.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Improved learning outcomes in literacy and in Irish should be prioritised.
- The pupils’ overall attendance levels should be improved.
- School security arrangements should be reviewed. Specifically, access to the school during the day should be monitored more carefully and the practice of permitting senior pupils to leave the yard at break time should be reviewed. Further means of making the school yard a safer, more secure and inclusive space should be explored.
- Appropriate accommodation for support teaching should be provided.
- Greater involvement of parents in the life and work of the school should be promoted.
3. Quality of School Management

- The quality of school management is good overall. The school is well managed by a hard-working board of management that is properly constituted. Minutes of meetings are maintained carefully and school accounts are vigilantly recorded. The board discusses and ratifies school policies and oversees their ongoing review. The chairperson provides valuable support through school visits and regular communication with the principal and staff.

- The quality of in-school management is good. The principal works in a highly dedicated and efficient manner. She has made very good progress since her appointment to the post in 2008. Rolls and registers are maintained very well. The principal is ably supported by a deputy principal and two post-holders—one of whom was on leave during the evaluation—and their contribution is rooted in a spirit of commitment and generosity. This spirit pervades throughout the staff as teachers volunteer to provide additional support to school initiatives. In its review of the duties assigned to post-holders, the board should include more curriculum leadership responsibility and a member of the in-school management team should be assigned to co-ordinate intercultural education and provision for English as an additional language.

- A recent refurbishment project by the board of management has helped to create a bright and pleasant learning environment. The classrooms are well resourced and include interactive whiteboards. Attention is given to environmental awareness and the school has received a green flag in the Green-Schools programme. The contribution of a committed and diligent ancillary staff is acknowledged and appreciated by the management and teachers.

- Certain aspects of accommodation and school security need further attention. The two support rooms are small and the use of the staff room as a teaching space for language support is unsatisfactory. Access to the school during the day should be monitored more carefully. In this context, the board should consider a buzzer at the main entrance. Despite recent refurbishment of the pupils' toilet facilities, the odour from the toilet block continues to be problematic and should be attended. Facilities for the staff should be improved also.

- In most classrooms, the management of pupils was very good during the evaluation. The majority of pupils demonstrated satisfactory confidence and self-esteem and participated well in curricular activities. Some pupils demonstrated notable politeness and courtesy. However, additional attention should be paid to the development of the pupils' listening skills and to establishing respectful speaker-listener relationships. In this regard, further engagement with the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum is recommended. School assemblies should be held regularly. Responses to the pupils' questionnaire indicate that they know the school rules and that the majority of pupils like school and get on well with others. However, the pupils' responses indicate that they are less persuaded about how well the pupils behave in their school and this is an area that should be explored further by the staff. Taking both the parents' and pupils' questionnaire responses into account, the school should consider augmenting its existing anti-bullying initiatives.

- As play space is restricted during wetter periods, it is strongly recommended that further means of making the yard more safe, secure and inclusive are explored by the board of management and the staff. It is also noted that senior pupils are permitted to leave the school grounds on one day per week to purchase lunch locally. While this practice may have the approval of the board of management and parents, it may present as a risk to pupils' health and safety. It is strongly recommended that this practice be reviewed.
• The board and staff are appreciative of ongoing parental support. However, further contribution by parents to the policy development process should be encouraged and there should be greater dissemination of existing school policies. There is no parents’ association although the board states that it is positively disposed towards such and has made attempts to encourage its formation. In questionnaire responses, parents indicated that they found the school to be welcoming and well run. They are generally happy with the school and indicate that their children like attending there.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

• The school has put in place a comprehensive and up-to-date suite of organisational policies that guides the work of the school. The purposeful leadership of the principal in this context is acknowledged. It is recommended now that an intercultural policy be implemented. This policy, amongst other things, should provide direction on the introduction of new pupils—including a buddy system—outline anti-racism initiatives and help to encourage better links with parents including details of parent-education programmes.

• Commendably, curricular plans for English, Mathematics and Science include references to agreed staff decisions on the implementation of generic principles of teaching and learning. It is recommended that this good practice be extended to Irish. In their action planning, the teachers have realised the need to review and develop their Irish plan to ensure it is more centred on the pupils’ needs and the Primary School Curriculum (1999). Planning for English as an additional language and for skills’ development in information and communications technologies (ICT) should be improved.

• All teachers provide long and short-term planning. However, the school is advised to adopt a more useful short-term planning template that places greater focus on differentiation and assessment. All classroom teachers should plan for specific language development opportunities in each curricular area. All teachers provide monthly progress reports.

• The school engages positively in self-evaluation practices, the beneficial effects of which may be seen in a number of recent curricular and organisational decisions. Following a period of considerable staff change, the current staff has worked hard to improve provision in the school and their work is having positive effect. There is need now to share this good news with the wider community and to promote the school more positively within the community.

• 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

• Cé go léirtear dearadh an-dearfach i leith na Gaeilge tá scóip le forbartha i gcáilíocht na foghlaíma, an teagaisc agus measúnú ar dhul chun cinn na ndaltaí sa teanga. B’thiú go mbeadh riachtanais na ndaltaí mar tús háite i bplean straitéiseach chun a scileanna
While a positive attitude is displayed towards the Irish language, there is scope for development in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of pupils' progress in the language. The needs of the pupils should be the focus of a strategic plan to develop their language skills. The majority of teachers use Irish as the language of instruction. Some good practice was observed whereby appropriate emphasis was placed on listening and on the communicative approach. Pair work and drama was used very effectively in this context. This good practice should be developed further throughout the school. It is apparent that the majority of pupils really enjoy learning rhymes, poetry and songs. It is recommended that this work be extended and that storytelling, morning news and a wider range of rhymes and songs are emphasised in every class. Reading and writing are linked with oral work, however, the pupils' overall reading and writing skills are weak. It is recommended that the current reading resources are reviewed to ensure that they are suited to the pupils' ability levels.

The quality of teaching and learning in English is satisfactory overall. The pupils are provided with worthwhile opportunities to talk and discuss and teachers incorporate the themes of *Up and Away* (Integrate Ireland Language and Training, 2006). More specific focus on language acquisition across the curriculum is needed, however. The use of a relevant phonics programme and various reading initiatives has helped most pupils to develop good functional reading skills. However, many pupils have understandable difficulties in comprehending the full meaning and nuances of the texts. There is need to differentiate reading materials more systematically in every classroom and to develop the pupils' comprehension skills. The pupils' attainment in standardised reading tests is an area of concern for teachers; they are committed to substantially improving literacy standards as part of their DEIS action plan. Teachers provide many opportunities for pupils to write in a variety of genres. However, this is an area where scope for development exists. A repertoire of poetry should be agreed at whole-school level and further focus placed on the memorisation and recitation of poetry. Current provision for the teaching of spelling needs review.

The overall provision for Mathematics is good. The pupils display a very positive attitude towards the subject and some display very high levels of ability. Pupils engage enthusiastically in learning activities and use mathematical language well. The majority displayed a good understanding and knowledge of number facts and tables and responded capably to various tasks during the evaluation. Achievement in standardised tests shows good improvement over the past number of years. To improve standards further, assessment data should be analysed more thoroughly in order to ascertain the areas where pupils are having specific difficulty and to guide in-class interventions. The pupils' written work is presented neatly and monitored regularly.

Science is well taught. Group work is used very effectively in all classrooms to promote the pupils' skills of working scientifically. A high level of organisation is evident and teachers are highly commendable for their team-teaching practices. Displays of pupils'
work are praiseworthy and the digital camera is used to very good effect to capture scientific explorations. Work in the immediate school environment is good; the school garden and the environmental awareness and care activities are laudable. The pupils are very enthusiastic in their learning and demonstrate very good knowledge of the work completed. In developing Science, teachers should use concept maps and open-ended tasks for investigation. There should also be a greater focus on developing the pupils’ scientific language and their skills in Design and Make.

- The overall quality of assessment is satisfactory. Pupil profiles are maintained in all classrooms; some teachers keep more comprehensive records in terms of the evidence gathered across the curriculum than others. Copybooks are corrected regularly. Teachers should continue to develop assessment for learning strategies and develop the pupils’ skills in the areas of self-assessment and peer assessment. In addition to the use of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy, the teachers should consider the whole-school use of non-reading intelligence tests.

- The overall quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. Teachers implement a relevant and effective curriculum in most subject areas and utilise innovative and resource-rich methodologies. They use team-teaching approaches to good effect and offer the pupils many worthwhile co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities. Involvement in Discover Primary Science and the Digital Schools’ Project might also be considered. The school provides the pupils with good opportunities to sing and perform and such work is highly commended. Parents, in their responses to questionnaires, indicate satisfaction with the quality of teaching in the school.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Four teachers provide specific support for pupils with additional and special educational needs; three are based in the school and one visits for a number of hours per week. All teachers work hard and are very well intentioned. However, as all four teachers are temporary appointments, this makes constancy of provision from year to year an issue. The co-ordinator for special education is on leave currently.

- The quality of learning support and resource provision is satisfactory overall. Planning and recording of progress is generally appropriate. However, learning targets should be SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed—and shared with parents. Learning outcomes should be recorded more clearly. Teaching, as observed during the evaluation, was consistent and careful and interactions with pupils were very positive. A special needs assistant (SNA) works capably and positively in support of pupils with specific care needs. Details of the activities allocated to the SNA should be included in individual educational programmes (IEPs). More appropriate time-out activities for pupils with special educational needs should be explored.

- Provision for Traveller pupils is provided in an integrated manner. In addition to withdrawal to the learning-support setting, there is some good in-class support offered across the curriculum. Appropriate planning is undertaken and language and social skills are promoted to good effect. The need for overall improvement in school attendance and literacy and numeracy attainments necessitates continuous vigilance and targeted attention. Good support is provided to the school by Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers.

- Additional support is provided to four pupils for whom English is an additional language. The provision is good; literacy targets are clearly identified and lessons are structured effectively. Overall, the pupils are progressing well. There is good communication with
class teachers in planning for the pupils' language needs. However, there should be further engagement with parents in the review of language programmes.

- The allocation of a co-ordinator for DEIS in this school is a recent one. The co-ordinator, based elsewhere, visits the school one day per week. A review of the cluster timetable is suggested to ensure the maximum amount of time possible to this school. The co-ordinator plans effectively and activities such as *Zippy's Friends*, drama and circle time are used very beneficially to support pupils' language and social development. Home visitation and building relationships with parents are significant elements of the co-ordinator's role. However, this continues to be a priority area for development.

- The school receives very good support from the School Completion Programme (SCP) co-ordinator. Her work includes the monitoring of attendance and the provision of individual support to a number of pupils in developing their social and behavioural skills. Various school activities are subsidised through the SCP including music classes, swimming and sports, the home-work club, a literacy-boost summer camp, and a transition programme for sixth class. To enhance provision, better links should be fostered with parents and other school-support staff.

- The quality of home-school partnership is generally satisfactory. Regular newsletters are issued and there is an open-door policy towards parents. Recently organised information meetings for parents proved successful and it is intended that further inclusive events will be organised for parents. The parents' responses in questionnaires as to how the school deals with complaints indicate that further clarity should be provided in that regard.

- Parent-teacher meetings are held annually in February. Consideration should be given to holding meetings in the first school term. At the end of each school year, a written report is issued to parents summarising pupils' progress and attainment. Standardised test results are shared with parents but more guidance might be needed in how to interpret these results.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

The BOM of St. Mary’s Boys NS wishes to acknowledge the professionalism and courtesy displayed by the inspectors to the staff and pupils during the WSE inspection. The Board welcomes this positive report and appreciates the affirmation given to the dedication and commitment of the board and of the school staff. The advice and encouragement given were very heartening. The Board accepts the findings of the report as a fair and positive account of the achievements, quality of teaching and management at Scoil Náisiúnta Mhuire na Toirbhíre.

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 of Management and the staff have taken on board the ideas, advice and recommendations given by the inspectors. Many of the recommendations have already been implemented and others have been included in our action plan for 2011/2012. Unfortunately owing to staffing and financial cutbacks since the WSE some recommendations in the report cannot be implemented this year.