An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St.Ita’s and St. Joseph’s School, Tralee
Co. Kerry

Uimhir rolla: 19376D

Date of inspection: 13th September 2010
1. Introduction

St. Ita’s and St Joseph’s School is a school for pupils with Mild General Learning Disability. There are sixty-nine pupils with the majority at post-primary level. The school benefits from the contribution of four part-time teachers. A new principal and deputy principal were appointed in 2009. The school is a lively community where all work closely to achieve their stated aim: “Through perseverance, we succeed”. 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 commitment of the board of management to supporting the work of the school.
- The awareness among the staff of the holistic needs of the pupils and the positive approaches adopted.
- The commitment to provide post-primary certification programmes.
- The contribution of the subject specialist teachers in extending the range of options for pupils.
- The collaborative culture, which is favourable to whole-school development.
- The manner in which staff has adopted a reflective attitude to evaluating approaches.

The following main recommendations are made:

- School enrolment policy should be adjusted to ensure compliance with legislation.
- Appropriate balance should be maintained between the pupils’ opportunities to pursue post-primary certification and their access to a broad curriculum.
- Formative, summative and diagnostic assessment should be used to identify areas of learning need, inform educational objectives, and to underpin the formation of instructional groups.

3. Quality of School Management

- The board of management is committed to the work of the school. While annual accounts of expenditure are audited, it would be beneficial to update the board with regard to the financial status at each meeting. The board is advised to continue to ratify re-drafted policies as has been indicated in the five year action plan drafted by the board of management and staff. It is recommended that aspects of the enrolment policy referring to prospective pupils with additional medical needs should be reviewed, to ensure their enrolment while still catering for their additional medical needs.
• The principal is dedicated to achieving high quality in every aspect of school life. She has progressed a school-wide consultation process resulting in the development of an action plan to improve curriculum implementation. Good delegation ensures that members of the in-school management team provide assistance through the various facets of their posts. They are alerted to the value of reviewing their duties on a formal basis with school management and leading the development of curricular review.

• The quality of the physical environment has been improved with recent upgrades to the roof and the provision of interactive whiteboards. The surrounding grounds are used for a variety of sports and a school garden has been established. The grounds could be further exploited to support subject instruction.

• There is a students’ council which meets regularly with the principal. Training for the members of the student council has been arranged. The provision of a designated notice board for council matters would assist in disseminating information to the students.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

• There is abundant evidence of collaborative, inclusive and ongoing planning. The school has devised a planning process to create a five year action plan for the period 2009-2014 that will be reviewed annually. Parents and pupils are involved in the planning process when appropriate.

• The staff uses an internal computer server in the school for the presentation of planning documentation and reports. All staff members have access to shared folders which are used for the circulation of materials.

• Commendable planning by some teachers shows clearly established linkages between the primary curriculum, the NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Pupils with Mild General Learning Disabilities and post-primary FETAC programmes. While a range of planning templates are available for the different subject areas and classes it is recommended that a common planning template be used by all teaching staff to support cohesion.

• The school needs to ensure that there is adequate coverage of all curricular areas for primary-aged pupils and sufficient subject choice at post-primary level to ensure the pupils’ access to a broad curriculum while balancing their opportunities to pursue certification options. The addition of more practical subjects and creative subjects such as Drama would enhance the range of provision at post-primary level.

• The special needs assistants contribute effectively to meeting the needs of pupils who require additional support. The school maximises the contribution of the part-time specialist teachers to provide a wide range of curricular access. When base class teachers are available they are constructively deployed to provide individual tuition to pupils where necessary.

Child protection policy and procedures

School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management is in the process of formally adopting 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 draft 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. The revised Child Protection policy is at a draft stage and requires formal ratification by the Board of Management.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Irish is not taught but consideration should be given to including a module such as Irish Cultural Studies in the future as a FETAC option.

- The learning resources for English are plentiful and are used effectively. The routines of the day provide opportunities for engaging the pupils in language-rich interactions and the teachers succeed in motivating pupils to participate in discussions. Emphasis should be given to extending the answers volunteered by the pupils beyond single word responses and to the avoidance of whole group answering. Pupils have the opportunity to read on a daily basis and care is taken to develop pupils’ phonological awareness and spelling. It is recommended that an informal reading inventory be compiled and graded according to reading difficulty. This could be used to match pupils to suitable learning levels, and provide access to developmental and independent reading.

- The teachers scaffold the writing process and due attention is paid to grammar and punctuation. When developing the writing aspect of the English programme, care should be taken to achieving a balance between the functional aspects of writing and more creative work. Teachers made effective use of cross-curricular opportunities afforded by FETAC modules to consolidate developing literacy skills. Materials available to support the Junior Certificate School Programme could be beneficially deployed.

- In Mathematics teachers provide effective learning experiences which allow for guided discovery and activity methods. Pupils’ interest in Mathematics is sustained by the maths-rich environment in a number of classrooms, and suitable equipment which includes interactive whiteboards. For the more senior pupils, real-life problems and use of calculators for computation work is a feature of the work. Preparation for state examinations features strongly in some classes. Some pupils would benefit from more regular revision of computational processes involving basic operations. Teachers should also consider employing more collaborative learning approaches. The majority of the respondents in the pupils’ questionnaire indicated that they engaged in group work. However, there was little evidence in planning documentation regarding the criteria used to determine the composition of groups in Mathematics and other curricular areas.

- Visual Arts instruction is provided for junior pupils where seasonal themes and integration with other areas of the curriculum form the focus for the activities. As pupils may remain at junior level for several years, the teachers should ensure adequate rotation of the six strands to guarantee a spiral approach to provision. Communal areas around the school are used to display completed art samples. At the post-primary level, the pupils compile portfolios of working drawings to support completed work. Additional work using fibre and fabric is provided in the Home Economics subject area and there is further scope for integrating the skills across subject areas. The school is proud of the accomplishments of the pupils at Junior Cycle level. At Leaving Certificate level, the use of both 2D and 3D responses to images from art history might enhance pupils’ recall of both European and Irish Art. The provision could be further enhanced with the use of additional ICT display facilities.

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is acknowledged by staff as a critical area of learning. Elements of SPHE are integrated across subject areas and FETAC Life Skills programmes. Pupils encounter a wide range of personal and social issues. Senior pupils
focus on the development of personal and social skills for adult life. Teachers should endeavour to get pupils to put on presentations in various curriculum areas to expand their personal competencies. The Relationships and Sexuality Education programme is addressed through the general content of the SPHE programme as well as in a sequence of specific lessons delivered by a designated teacher.

- Although linked to Social, Environmental, and Scientific Education, SPHE should be treated as a discrete area of the curriculum. The determination of lesson content should be based on the assessed needs of pupils and the teachers could develop suitable checklists to track the development of personal and social skills among pupils. Drama could be used more extensively to help pupils explore ways of coping with demanding social situations.

- Assessment has already been identified by the staff as a priority area for review in the school action plan. The assessment procedures and the recording of progress in English vary across all the class levels. It is recommended that a whole-school policy on the assessment of literacy be established. Pupil profiles in Mathematics should also be developed to facilitate the tracking of pupils’ progress over time. A wide variety of suitable assessment methods, including diagnostic, criterion referenced and summative tests, should be used in every classroom to identify areas of learning need, inform educational objectives and underpin the formation of instructional groups.

- The teachers maintain a range of Cúntais Mhiosiúla. In addition to recording the content areas covered and the certification programmes being followed, the skills, knowledge and progress of the pupils should also be documented.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- The school has established a special class for post-primary aged pupils with ASD. Classroom accommodation incorporates a quiet room and structured workstations. To address the social needs of the pupils with ASD, the school could consider the range of inclusion options that could be facilitated, such as reverse integration. The board of management has encouraged the teachers to avail of continuous professional development opportunities particularly in the area of ASD.

- As part of the school’s action plan the board has also encouraged teachers to partake in continuing professional development in other areas where they identify a need, such as individual education planning, effective teaching methodologies, FETAC, and Social, Personal, and Health Education.

- Many of the pupils enrolled in the school travel considerable distances to attend while other pupils come from areas that experience social or economic disadvantage. The school provides a supervised breakfast and a full lunch to all the pupils. The school has forged good working relationships with community associations and relevant multi-disciplinary personnel with regard to accessing services for pupils.

- The school has formed both formal and informal links with adjacent schools for social and curricular reasons. It would be particularly beneficial if the school could benefit from sharing facilities such as wood-work that are unavailable in their own school.

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The valuable work, support and advice of the inspectors during and after the WSE is very much appreciated by the Board of Management and staff in St. Its’s and St. Joseph’s Primary and Post-Primary School. We would like to extend a sincere thanks to both inspectors.

The report is an accurate reflection of the hard work which is presently being completed by staff in our school. The main recommendations made by the Inspectors are included in our ever evolving self evaluative school plan. As a staff we endeavour to achieve the highest standard of education for all the pupils in our care.

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 recommended adjustments have been made to the enrolment policy to support pupils with additional medical needs with the enrolment process.

Thanks to the support of both inspectors the school has commenced Woodwork as an additional subject. Gaeilge; History; Geography and Science have also been initiated as additional subjects in our school for selected post-primary pupils.

Assessment is an area which has been identified as a priority in our school plan. Staff are presently involved in the development of checklists in literacy, numeracy and social skills which are designed to facilitate our pupils and ensure that the transfer of information throughout the school will enhance teaching and learning. Standardised tests for literacy and numeracy are to be completed by our school psychological and designated staff to ensure that every student can be tracked and effective teaching methodologies identified to ensure the highest possible level of education for all pupils.