Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

St Nicholas
Ballina, Co. Mayo
Uimhir rolla: 19773N

Date of inspection: 9 November 2010
St Nicholas Special School caters for pupils with moderate, severe, and profound general learning disabilities. Many of the pupils have additional disabilities and medical conditions. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
<td>1 Administrative Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
<td>12 (9 Full Time)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- There is ample evidence of professional commitment, competence, and creativity among the teachers who provide stimulating curriculum experiences that are differentiated to take account of the pupils’ individual needs.

- Sensitive care is provided for the pupils by responsive special needs assistants.

- The board of management provides generous, voluntary support, informed guidance and facilitates the continuous professional development of staff.

- The in-school management team have devised sound organisational structures. They evaluate the quality of service and plan strategies for improvement.

- The staff members cooperate well with health professionals and endeavour to ensure that learning continues during the time available for therapies.

- The newly-built school allows the curriculum to be taught effectively in an accessible and visually stimulating educational environment.

The following main recommendations are made:

- Aspects of the enrolment policy referring to pupils with additional needs should be reviewed.

- Management should continue to engage with parents and transport providers to ensure that all pupils receive their entitlement to a full day in school.

- To support new staff, further documentation should be compiled which lays out the
school’s organisational structures, outlines roles and responsibilities and provides guidance to staff especially in regard to record keeping.

- The modes of assessment used by the school should be extended to ensure a more focussed tracking of pupils’ participation and achievement of short term targets in IEPS.
- Links with other schools should be further extended to provide social contexts and to further promote the inclusion of the pupils into general society.

3. Quality of School Management

- The Board of management sets about its work strategically and collaboratively. Members bring relevant qualifications and experience to the work of managing the school.
- The school principal is highly proficient and has a well thought-out vision for St Nicholas School. She promotes a culture of shared leadership. She is supported by an effective in-school management team. The team addresses management priorities in a concerted and collaborative manner.
- The school’s special needs assistants are deployed effectively. They attend sensitively to the care needs of pupils and assist pupils in accessing particular activities.
- The school has amassed an extensive library of profession materials and a wide selection of suitable resources to support the implementation of the curriculum.
- Fund-raising events are organised to support targeted projects. The board of management is conscious of the importance of providing medical care to pupils with fragile health and employs a school nurse from its own funds. A priority of the board is to retain this service which it regards as essential.
- While home-school links are generally well developed, the parents are not involved in developing school plans to a great extent and the school is now examining ways in which this aspect can be developed. There is no parents association at present.
- According to responses to the whole-school evaluation questionnaire, the vast majority of parents consider the school to be well run. They report that pupils like school and that there are good arrangements for parent/teacher meetings. However results of the questionnaire indicate that a number are not fully aware of some school policies. Therefore the school should continue in its efforts to develop communication systems to ensure that information is provided on all aspects of the work for parents.
- The accommodation is generally of very high quality. There are wide corridors and spacious communal areas. There is a medical room and rooms for use by visiting professionals. Well-ordered learning environments are maintained in each classroom. Attention needs to be paid to improving the acoustic conditions in some areas. The school benefits from the committed support of the secretary, caretaker and cleaning staff.
- It is recommended that aspects of the enrolment policy referring to pupils with additional needs should be reviewed, to avoid any ambiguous interpretation of the policy.
- The school has developed a code of behaviour. In accordance with National Educational Welfare guidelines, the school now needs to set out what can be regarded as acceptable
standards of behaviour and to describe what constitutes gross and minor breaches of the code.

- Most pupils avail of the Department of Education and Skills school transport scheme and some children travel long distances. Some arrive after the school's opening time, and some leave early. Others arrive late because of medical conditions which require attention at home. It is recommended that the school continues to engage with relevant parties to ensure that all pupils receive their entitlement to a full day in school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- A collaborative approach has been adopted in producing a three-year school development plan which addresses organisational, curricular and resource areas.

- All teachers prepare long and short term plans which delineate in a clear manner the content to be covered. Class objectives are generally appropriate and methodologies are well thought-out. The school has examined its approaches to short term planning with a view to establishing a more uniform approach.

- Each teacher seeks to meet the needs of individual pupils through Individual Education plans (IEPs). The IEPs are informed by professional reports, and consultations with parents. The IEPs focus on long term goals in regard to communication, social skills and behaviour. In some cases short-term objectives could be more specific, measurable and timed. While records of progress are maintained they sometimes lack the necessary detail to describe pupil progress. In some cases concurrent recording should be carried out to take note of the extent of pupil's participation in activities, and the level of assistance provided to pupils in carrying out tasks.

Child protection policy and procedures

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

- Tá cead ag na daltaí a fhreastalaíonn ar an scoil seo, gan Gaeilge a dhéanamh, de bharr raon mhíchumais foghlama. (The pupils in this school present with a range of learning disabilities and are entitled to an exemption from studying Irish.)

- Opportunities for language development and communication are exploited through the use of news sessions, circle time, and sensory stories. Pupils are supported to smell, touch and manipulate materials that are connected to lesson objectives. Pupils who have no oral ability are assisted to make contributions using devices such as Big-Mac switches. PECS and LÁMH are used to support the acquisition of communication skills. A school wide policy that the adults sign when in view of any pupil who communicates using ‘Lámh’ could be an effective way of supporting incidental learning. Where
appropriate, objects of reference are combined with pictures and oral language to explain daily routines. Foundation and emergent reading activities are implemented in all classes and the Language Experience Approach is used to create individual reading texts.

- Some teachers include the use of the Canaan Barrie on-body signs for pupils with visual impairment. The school should consider conducting a functional vision assessment of pupils who have a visual impairment. The inclusion of Moon as a methodology for accessing literacy for visual impaired pupils might also be considered. Pupils develop fine motor control in activities such as tracing, colouring, drawing, and letter formation exercises.

- Stimulating multi-sensory activities in Mathematics are linked to the pupils’ everyday experiences. For more able pupils, particular consideration is given to the social importance of mathematics. Measurement is used for real purposes in other areas, such as cookery.

- In Social, Environmental, and Scientific Education, teachers ensure that learning takes place through active participation. Pupils listen to well-known stories about the past.

- Geography lessons concentrate on assisting pupils to gain an awareness of familiar people and places in their school and home environments.

- In Science interesting activities are carefully selected by teachers to develop awareness of cause and effect and to enable the pupils to anticipate and predict events. The work is to be further supported with the provision of a sensory garden area.

- The pupils’ art work is of a high standard and ICT is used well in the creation of art. Music is integrated into other areas. Performances in Music are recorded on DVD and shown to parents. Some pupils participate in music therapy. The teachers frequently use dramatisation of sensory stories to relate the drama to real experiences and Drama is used to consolidate learning in Language, SPHE, and SESE.

- In Physical Education lessons pupils are helped to develop co-ordination and motor skills. The school has access to a swimming pool. The principal reports that on the advice of health professionals the hydro-therapy pool is not being used at present.

- In SPHE circle-time activities focus on elements such as self-identity and awareness of others. Attention is paid to the development of pupils’ social skills during the lunch period.

- The teachers have identified assessment as an area to be developed. The school already uses a range of test instruments. Progress towards achieving objectives could be recorded more systematically in some cases. At present areas of pupils’ development being tracked concentrate on behaviour management and the range of functional assessments could be extended and include areas such self-care.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- In St Nicholas the pupils are well cared for. Successful collaboration is evident between school staff and members of the multi-disciplinary team. The school provides a hot lunch for pupils and a school bus is available for educational excursions.

- The school has developed systematic transition procedures for accessing adult services, and these arrangements should be documented and shared with parents.
• The school has developed the provision for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders and now includes a multi-sensory room. Individual structured workstations are provided. Because of the location of hoists and changing rooms some staff members consider that the scope for the inclusion of pupils with more complex physical needs is limited. Teachers have been creative in devising opportunities for these pupils to integrate with their peers.

• The school has formed valuable links with adjacent schools. It is recommended that these links be further extended to further promote the inclusion of the pupils into the community.
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, Principal, teachers and staff members wish to expend gratitude to the Inspectors who visited school and carried out their work in a courteous and professional manner.

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 school have engaged with transport provider to ensure so far as is possible that all pupils receive their full entitlement to a full school day.

The enrolment policy has been reviewed

A school web-site has been developed

Documentation to support new staff continues to be compiled

Training and Planning and assessment to take place in September