Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál
Ballymote, County Sligo
Uimhir rolla: 19964U

Date of inspection: 20 January 2011
1. Introduction

Scoil Mhuire gan Smál, under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Achonry, is located in the town of Ballymote in the heart of County Sligo. 233 pupils (113 boys and 120 girls) are enrolled from junior infants to sixth class, some in dual-grade classrooms. A full-time staff of thirteen teachers is supported by two part-time teachers and two special needs assistants. At the time of the evaluation, a substitute teacher was in place for a teacher on leave. While school attendance is generally satisfactory, there is room for improvement in a minority of cases; the school is advised to remain ever vigilant in that regard. During this inspection four subjects were evaluated: English, Irish, Mathematics and Drama. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

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

- The board of management is well informed and very supportive of the work of the school.
- The parent body and the parents’ association are beneficially involved in many aspects of school life.
- The school building and grounds are very well maintained and the learning environment is bright and comfortable.
- The principal and staff are hardworking and diligent in their approach and very committed to their pupils.
- The quality of teaching and learning in English and Mathematics is good.
- Overall, the pupils’ attainments in standardised tests are in line with national norms.

The following main recommendations are made:

- A systematic cycle of review and ratification of all school policies, including curricular policies, should be implemented.
- Posts of responsibility should be appraised regularly to ensure accordance with the priorities of the school.
- Whole-school policy, planning and implementation of Drama should be more closely aligned to the Primary School Curriculum (1999).
- Review and augmentation of the school’s assessment approaches are required.
- Certain aspects of special education provision should be reviewed and a special needs coordinator nominated to lead this work.

3. Quality of School Management

- An effective board of management is very supportive of the work of the school. Members have allocated responsibilities and avail of training opportunities. Financial reports are presented at regular meetings and accounts are to be certified shortly. The chairperson is a frequent visitor to the school. Appropriately, the board has reviewed and ratified a number of policies including child protection, health and safety, anti-bullying, attendance and enrolment. It is recommended that this practice be extended to include curricular areas, support for pupils, assessment, record keeping and action planning.

- The school building and grounds are very well maintained. The board is commended for availing of the summer works scheme and other grants for new classrooms, repair works and the provision of a breadth of curriculum resources. The board intends to seek further support
to enhance playground space and adjoining playing fields and to construct a general purposes room. It is suggested that adequate support teaching and office space be provided, ideally through re-arrangement of internal accommodation. Entrance security should also be improved during school hours. It is recommended that the board pursues the development of a school web site in order to extend communication channels with the general parent body. Consideration should also be given to extending the range and modes of communication with parents, as outlined under section 20 of the Education Act 1998.

- Members of the parents’ association are very earnest and committed to their task. They are appreciative of the efforts and diligence of staff. The association assists with a variety of school events. The principal regularly attends meetings of the association. It is now suggested that association members access specific training for their role. Communication with the general parent body is varied through, for example, annual parent-teacher meetings, written end-of-year progress reports and homework notebooks.

- The principal has long experience of the school and attends assiduously and diligently to her duties. School registers are appropriately maintained. A greater focus on curriculum leadership would benefit the school as a learning community. The deputy principal and the middle-management team have responsibilities for English, Mathematics, sports, resources, learning support policy and the Green Schools programme. Members of the team attend very earnestly to their current duties, collaborating on an informal basis. In progressing the middle-management remit, it is recommended that formal meetings be convened and that the schedule of duties be reviewed annually. The school derives very significant benefits from the work and support of its secretary and caretaker.

- Most pupils were well managed during the evaluation and, in the main, interacted very well with their teachers and peers. There is need, however, to enforce respectful listening and conversation rules more consistently in a small number of classrooms.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- There is scope for development with regard to school plans and planning processes, including a need to develop a more consistent and collaborative approach to implementation, review and school self-evaluation. Further discussion and feedback, together with clear accountability procedures, are necessary to improve implementation. It is suggested that the board pursues its original plan to employ an external facilitator to assist with this process. It is recommended that the board of management, parents and teachers engage in whole-school self-evaluation in a more structured, systematic manner around clearly articulated targets for improvement. For example, an action plan should detail how staff development priorities in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) are to be achieved.

- The quality of long-term classroom planning is fair, broadly reflecting the breadth and balance of the curriculum. The quality of short-term planning is varied. A few teachers present planning which does not reference the curriculum appropriately while others outline learning objectives, assessment approaches and differentiated learning activities. The staff is advised to develop a common approach to short-term planning that incorporates curriculum principles and objectives. All teachers maintain monthly progress records. Whole-staff agreement on the specificity of these records would be beneficial.

- 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

- Ar an iomlán, tá láidreachtáil le feiscint i ngnéithe éagsúla i bhfoighlaim na Gaeilge tríd an scoil ach tá forbairt ag teastáil i ngnéithe áirithe eile don sholáthar. Tugtar deiseanna maithí labhartha do na daltaí i ranganna áirithe le nuacht an lae, scéalta nua-chumtha, rólghlacadh, cliuchi teanga, filíocht agus ceistíúcháin. Ach i ranganna eile ní léiríonn daltaí an tuiscint ná an liofacht sa teanga mar a bheadh súil leis. Moltar feidhm a bhaint as a thuilleadh stráitéisi do mhúineadh agus d’fhoghlaim chun chur le teanga bheo chumarsáideach. Cé go léiríonn cuid de na daltaí cruthaiste agus tuiscint sa teanga mar a bheadh súil leis. Moltar feidhm a bhaint as a thuilleadh stráitéisi do mhúineadh agus d’fhoghlaim chun chur le teanga bheo chumarsáideach.

- Overall, there are obvious strengths in various aspects of the learning of Irish throughout the school but development is required in other features of provision. Good communication opportunities are provided for pupils in some classes through news of the day, creative stories, role-play, speech-games, poetry and questioning. However, in other classrooms, pupils do not display the expected understanding, fluency or competence in the language. It is recommended that further strategies be used to supplement the teaching and learning of a living, strong language.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in English is good in most aspects. An integrated approach to the development of pupils’ oral language skills is evident in many classrooms. It is recommended that this development be addressed more systematically on a whole-school basis and that discrete-language time be guided by clear objectives. The use of graded and parallel reading resources and differentiated approaches support reading development to good effect. A reading folder should be considered for the infant and junior classes. A review of the effectiveness of the current spelling programme would also be worthwhile. While, in most classrooms, pupils have regular opportunities to write in a range of genres and for a variety of purposes and audiences, pupils in a small number of classrooms present as hesitant writers. Although carefully monitored in some classrooms, there is inconsistency in handwriting styles and presentation throughout the school.

- The quality of teaching in Mathematics is good overall. Lessons observed during the evaluation were generally well paced and resource rich. In most instances, instruction was clear and pupils were appropriately engaged. Whole-class teaching was the key teaching methodology but this was complemented by effective group activity in a number of classrooms. It is recommended that differentiated and group activity becomes the norm in every classroom. A whole-school approach to the development of mathematical language, problem solving and the use of maths trails would be beneficial. A more robust whole-school approach to teaching tables is recommended. In the infant classrooms, teachers have opted not to utilise a commercial textbook series and to complete a more learner-responsive programme. While this decision has considerable merit, it is essential that provision be supported by a clearly structured, well-documented programme.

- The overall quality of provision for Drama requires significant improvement. Some teachers, particularly in the senior classes, demonstrate good teaching approaches and familiarity with the curriculum. However, in some classrooms, the tuition provided by an external tutor employed by the board of management is the central drama input. While
support from an external tutor has merit, it should not become the sole experience for the pupils. A broader, more progressive whole-school programme based on the Primary School Curriculum-Drama should be planned and implemented.

- The quality of assessment is generally satisfactory but there are a number of areas that should be developed. Throughout the school, there is evidence of regular correction and there is good record keeping in some areas of learning. The infant pupils are screened for indicators of early learning difficulties. Standardised tests in English reading and Mathematics are administered appropriately. The written policy on assessment needs updating and whole-school implementation of agreed approaches is advised. The support materials from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will be useful in this regard. It is recommended that parents be fully informed about their children’s progress in standardised tests.

- The overall quality of teaching and learning is good. Lessons in many classrooms are delivered in a lively and stimulating manner and pupils are effectively involved in collaborative and small group methodologies. Most pupils appear motivated in their learning. An analysis of parental questionnaires shows that almost all parents regard that teaching is good and that their children are progressing well while three-quarters of pupils indicated that they enjoy their learning experiences. The recent introduction of interactive whiteboards into a number of classrooms has been very successful. Greater hands-on use of ICT by pupils across the school, complemented by the implementation of an e-learning plan, is advised.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- While the overall quality of support for pupils is good, there are a number of areas that need review. A team of six provides specific support for pupils with additional and special educational needs. Three are school based, one is based elsewhere and two provide part-time support to the school. Only one of the three school-based team members remains in the school full time while two share time with other schools. Beginning the week of the evaluation, a further teacher, based elsewhere, was assigned to provide additional support hours for the school. To enhance manageability of provision, the board of management needs to review staffing arrangements. It should endeavour also to employ appropriately qualified teachers for all special education posts.

- Members of the support team work very diligently and co-operate very well, at times even sharing teaching space. They employ useful planning and recording approaches and implement agreed policy decisions. The team should avail of further support from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the special educational needs organiser (SENO) in the development of individual learning programmes. A broader repository of assessments should be utilised to inform pupils’ learning programmes. Formal meetings should be conducted with mainstream teachers and parents to discuss learners’ progress against specific learning targets. In-class support should be undertaken more widely, particularly in the junior classes, as part of early intervention work. It is advised that the special education team is given a stronger advisory role in respect of all whole-school literacy and numeracy interventions. To spearhead such work, it is recommended that a special needs coordinator be nominated. Two special needs assistants contribute positively and significantly to the care and welfare of pupils with special educational needs.

- The board of management, principal and staff members are sensitive to any instances of disadvantage which manifest and endeavour to be as supportive as possible of pupils who may need additional support. Very good school-community links have been established and the local community is supportive of school initiatives.

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