

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole School Evaluation
REPORT**

**St Mary's National School
Windsor Avenue, Fairview
Dublin 3
Uimhir rolla: 19981U**

Date of inspection: 23 March 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Mary's NS, Fairview, Dublin 3 was undertaken in March, 2010. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in English, Irish, Mathematics and Drama. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St Mary's National School caters for boys and girls from junior infants to first class and for girls only from second to sixth class. It is under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. The school is included in Band 1 of the School Support Programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity to Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion.

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

	Number
Pupils enrolled in the school	247
Mainstream classes in the school	13
Teachers on the school staff	23
Mainstream class teachers	13
Teachers working in support roles	9
Special needs assistants	3

Pupils' attendance levels are very good. The school has devised creative strategies to promote punctuality and regular attendance.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The school provides a well-ordered, caring learning environment with staff members assuming a shared responsibility to meet the needs of individual children. The board of management and parents actively support teachers in providing a broad range of educational experiences to nurture the holistic development of pupils. Particular emphasis is placed on creating a supportive, inclusive school atmosphere where the principles of respect, self-esteem and endeavour are fostered.

1.2 Board of management

The school is managed by an enthusiastic and committed board of management which is properly constituted and sets about its work in an organised, strategic manner. It holds meetings regularly. Minutes are taken and financial records are presented at each of meeting. The school accounts are audited annually. Board members are assigned roles and duties in an appropriate manner and some members have availed of training in the area of financial management.

The board is centrally involved in the formulation and ratification of school policies, both organisational and curricular. Among its priorities are the provision of continuing professional development for its teachers and the development of the school's intercultural policy. The board endeavours to actively support the school in a number of practical ways. For example, it oversees the maintenance and upkeep of the school building and it plans to refurbish and extend the school library.

The board is acutely aware of the necessity to meet both the academic and pastoral needs of its pupils. It is also very conscious of the need to involve parents in the life of the school and seeks to do so in a warm, welcoming manner. The board has high expectations for its pupils and expressed satisfaction with the quality of education currently being provided to them.

1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team comprises the principal, the deputy principal, an assistant principal and four teachers with special duties posts. The principal, who began in her current post in September 2009, approaches her work in a committed, dynamic and very capable manner. She actively seeks to foster a warm, nurturing and supportive school climate. She promotes a collaborative school culture, successfully empowering staff and the general school community to engage in change and to focus on various school initiatives designed to make the curriculum as accessible and appealing as possible for pupils. The principal is very conscious of the necessity to maintain and enhance the standard of achievement of pupils.

Specific duties, encompassing organisational, curricular and pastoral responsibilities have been defined for each member of the in-school management team. Meetings of the team are held regularly and posts and duties are reviewed periodically. It is recommended that, at the next review of posts, responsibility for curriculum leadership in the area of Mathematics should be assigned.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The school implements an open approach to communication with parents and the wider school community. It periodically issues a newsletter outlining school activities and future events. It sends text messages to parents in the event of an emergency. Letters home or notes in pupils' homework journals are used to maintain ongoing contact. Parents are regularly informed of the progress of their children. All parents receive a written report in the last term of each school year and formal parent-teacher meetings are held annually. Parents are encouraged to visit the school regularly and to partake in various school activities. The provision of a parents' room is of great benefit in this regard.

The school has an industrious and committed parents' association which meets regularly. Issues that are typically addressed are: fundraising, parents' involvement in various school functions and parents' support for a variety of in-school events. The association is involved in a wide range of school activities including school sports days, the school's breakfast club, and school book fairs. The association communicates with parents and the wider school community via letter, the school newsletter, and a notice board in the school exclusively for parents' use.

The parents' association is widely consulted at an early stage in the formulation of school policies. The association stated that it is very satisfied with the progress and achievement of pupils. It also stated that it is very satisfied with the manner in which the school communicates with parents and addresses their concerns.

1.5 Management of pupils

During the evaluation, pupils' behaviour was found to be excellent. Pupils were polite during all interactions in classrooms and on corridors. There was much evidence that their positive attitudes to working contribute significantly to the overall quality of school life.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of whole-school planning is very good. All staff members have a copy of the school plan and copies of policies are available in the parents' room. A comprehensive plan is in place which provides specific guidance to teachers on approaches to the delivery of all the curriculum subjects. The school also has an action plan for the regular review of both curricular and organisational policies.

The school receives funding under Band 1 of the Department's DEIS programme. As required under that programme, the school devised a three-year action plan, beginning in 2007. The action plan is well thought out and prioritises the following areas for action: improving literacy and numeracy standards, improving pupil attendance, developing parental involvement throughout the school, and furthering partnerships with external agencies. The action plan sets specific targets that are grounded in concrete classroom practice. There is commendable emphasis on the actions needed to realise these targets at both a whole-school level and within individual classroom settings. The plan is currently being reviewed, with targets being re-examined.

The quality of teachers' planning is satisfactory. Working in collaboration at each class level, teachers write long and short-term plans to guide activities in their classrooms. In general, these plans provide clear descriptions of lesson content. In a number of cases, teachers also plan for differentiation, integration and assessment. It is recommended that the school reviews its approaches to classroom planning with a view to sharing best practice and putting greater emphasis on setting out learning objectives in short-term planning. Further attention should also be given to describing how teaching and learning will be differentiated to cater for the different needs of children in classes. With regard to the system for recording monthly progress, it is recommended that the school reviews its current approach and considers devising a common template which all teachers complete each month to indicate the progress made in the various curriculum areas in their individual classes.

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. However, it is recommended that the policy should specify the name, rather than just the current job title, of the DLP and the deputy DLP.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

Gaeilge

Tá caighdeán sásúil á bhaint amach i múineadh agus foghlaim na Gaeilge. Is léir go bhfuil dearcadh dearfach i leith na Gaeilge timpeall na scoile agus go bhfuil fonn ar na daltaí í a fhoghlaim. Múintear comhrá Gaeilge sna ranganna uile. Faoi mar atá molta sa churaclam, cuirtear béim ar an gcur chuige cumarsáideach agus ar chumas na ndaltaí a fhobhairt chun an Ghaeilge a sheilbhiú go nádúrtha. Tugtar deiseanna do dhaltaí freisin éisteacht leis an nGaeilge á labhairt go leanúnach ag múinteoirí. Baintear leas tairbheach as Frása na Seachtaine agus straitéisí eile dá leithéid chun foclóir agus cumas cainte an ndaltaí a leathnú. Baintear úsáid mhaith as an nGaeilge mar theanga theagaisc agus mar theanga bhainistíochta i bhformhór na ranganna. Tá go leor rann agus píosaí filíochta foghlamtha ag na daltaí. Feictear roinnt mhaith prionta i nGaeilge timpeall na scoile. Ó rang a dó ar aghaidh, spreagtar daltaí chun léimh agus scríobh i nGaeilge go rialta agus tá ag éirí go maith san obair seo. Moltar anois gan an iomarcha ceisteanna a chur le linn ceachtanna ach straitéisí eile a chumadh a thabharfadh deiseanna do na daltaí pé Ghaeilge atá acu a úsáid i gcomhthéacs comhrá nádúrtha.

Irish

A satisfactory standard is reached in the teaching and learning of Irish. A positive attitude to Irish is apparent in the school and pupils are anxious to learn the language. Irish conversation lessons are taught in all classes. As is recommended in the curriculum, emphasis is put on the communicative approach and on developing pupils' skills in acquiring Irish in a natural context. Pupils are also provided with opportunities to hear Irish spoken on an ongoing basis by their teachers. Phrase of the Week and other such strategies are used beneficially to extend pupils' vocabulary and fluency. Good use is made of Irish as the language of instruction and management in the majority of classes. Pupils have learnt a good range of poems and rhymes. A good deal of print in Irish is on display throughout the school. From second class on, pupils are regularly encouraged to read and write in Irish with considerable success. It is recommended that an excessive amount of questions should not be asked during lessons but that other strategies should be devised to provide pupils with opportunities to use the Irish they have acquired in natural conversation contexts.

English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is very good. The programme of work is guided by a comprehensive and well-formulated school plan. The school has been proactive in promoting and developing literacy standards in recent times. To this end, it has set in motion a number of initiatives which are aimed at developing pupils' skills in reading, writing and oral language proficiency. Among such initiatives are: Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), the *First Steps Literacy Programme* and Power Hour. Many of these initiatives support the further involvement of parents in their children's learning. These approaches are clearly paying dividends and, when combined with supports from the special education team, are serving to improve standards of achievement across all aspects of the English curriculum. Many of these initiatives are targeted at pupils in junior classes and an appropriate policy of early intervention is in place. It is recommended that the school should now consider extending aspects of these initiatives to more senior pupils to focus on developing their higher-order skills such as distinguishing between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity and facilitating pupils to respond to writing through drama. It is also recommended that formal grammar lessons should not be taught in junior classes.

The school itself is presented in an attractive, print-rich and stimulating manner. Samples of the pupils' written work are in evidence throughout the school. Teachers are commended for the exciting and creative manner in which they approach the development of the pupils' writing. Such approaches pay appropriate attention to the writing process. Pupils write in a variety of genres and reveal pride and interest in their writing. In some classes, pupils have written their own books. It is recommended that the school should consider opportunities to disseminate such good practices and also, to share the written work of senior pupils with junior classes.

3.2 Mathematics

Teaching and learning in Mathematics is underpinned by a well-formulated school plan. The plan is comprehensive and detailed, making very good provision for focused approaches to the development of pupils' mathematical skills. It also places commendable emphasis on the active involvement of pupils in their learning. While the plan refers to the use of mathematics trails, it is recommended that the school should make more specific reference to their use in the next review of the school plan for Mathematics.

The quality of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good. Lessons are generally lively and well-structured with very good provision for the active involvement of pupils. Pupils enjoy Mathematics and reveal a lively interest in the subject, frequently asking questions during lessons. The school has acquired a wide selection of resources for the implementation of the mathematics curriculum and hands-on activities are a feature of many lessons. Teachers are commended for the promotion of such positive attitudes to the subject. Mathematics lessons make good provision for revision, linkage and integration with other curriculum areas.

Recently, the school analysed its standardised test results in Mathematics and decided to focus further attention on developing pupils' problem-solving skills. The use of data to inform planning in this way should take place on an ongoing basis.

Currently, the *Ready Steady Go* mathematics programme is primarily used with pupils in junior and senior infants. The school intends to apply some of the principles and approaches used in this programme to other class levels. This initiative is praiseworthy.

3.3 Drama

The quality of teaching and learning in Drama is good. The work is guided by a comprehensive school plan. Drama is addressed effectively in this school within both discrete and integrated contexts. Discrete drama lessons make suitable provision for pupils to enter physically, emotionally and intellectually into the world of Drama. Shape and space are used imaginatively, with very good provision for pupils to act in role. The use of such drama activities also provides pupils with opportunities to explore feelings, knowledge and ideas making good use of a variety of resources. Creative and insightful provision is in place for the use of Drama across a range of curricular areas most notably, English, History, Gaeilge and Mathematics.

3.4 Assessment

The quality of assessment procedures and practices in this school is very good. A good range of modes of assessment is utilised including teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, standardised tests and diagnostic tests. In each classroom, the outcomes of assessments are carefully recorded and filed. Among individual teachers, anecdotal records, portfolios of pupils' work, pupil profiles and checklists for spellings and tables are maintained. A range of suitable standardised tests is administered each year and results are carefully analysed. The work completed by pupils in copybooks and workbooks is regularly monitored and helpful, supportive comments encourage pupils to greater effort. In order to build on this good work it is

recommended that a tracking system to monitor the achievement of individual pupils as they progress through the school should be considered.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Very good systems are in place to support pupils with learning difficulties. There is commendable emphasis on early intervention and support is delivered using a variety of modes. The school has three full-time learning-support teachers on staff. Teachers collaborate with each other to seek the best learning outcomes for pupils. Support teaching is delivered in a very warm and affirming manner where pupils experience a sense of success during lessons and clearly enjoy them. Teachers use a battery of appropriate diagnostic tests to determine individual needs and to help plan appropriate learning programmes.

Learning support focuses on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy competences. The school has initiated a number of special programmes including *Reading Recovery* and *Mathematics Recovery* to support learning. Teachers provide additional support using a judicious combination of pupil withdrawal and in-class work. It is recommended that the school reviews its policy for delivering in-class support and, in so doing, clarifies the roles and functions of the class teacher and support teacher. Furthermore, it is recommended that the school reviews the nature and extent of support being provided to pupils in senior classes. A policy of early intervention with less intensive support as pupils reach senior classes is recommended.

There are a number of pupils with assessed special needs in the school and they are being appropriately supported by their class teachers and by one full-time and two part-time resource teachers. Individual education programmes (IEPs) are very well constructed with parents, teachers and other agencies involved as required. Learning targets are carefully described and systematically reviewed. Support for the pupils is delivered in a caring, professional manner and a good range of resources to enhance teaching and learning has been acquired. In order to build on this good foundation, it is recommended that more specific reference to the role and functions of special needs assistants be included in the school plan.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

Two full-time teachers provide additional support for pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL). The teachers work closely with the mainstream class teachers in order to support pupils in an inclusive manner. Support is provided through a combination of withdrawal and in-class work. An appropriate learning programme is planned and delivered in a purposeful, professional way. The EAL rooms are bright and attractive and the colourful displays are relevant and supportive. Progress is appropriately assessed periodically and records are carefully maintained.

The school is involved in the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme and a shared HSCL co-ordinator works in the school. The school has a dedicated parents' room and the HSCL co-ordinator has put in place a variety of courses and other activities to support home-school links. To enhance the quality of this work and to ensure the dissemination of best practice, it is recommended that a greater degree of in-class parental involvement at infant level should be facilitated and a report on the various home-school initiatives be provided to the board of management each year.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is managed by a committed, supportive board of management.
- The school is led by a dedicated, dynamic and capable principal.
- A combination of experienced and new teaching staff work diligently to cater for the needs of all pupils.
- The school has acquired a good stock of educational resources to support teaching and learning in all areas of the curriculum.
- Excellent support is provided to the school by parents.
- A positive, caring learning environment is evident in all classrooms and around the school.
- Organisational routines are effective in ensuring the smooth running of the school.
- Very good assessment practices are in evidence.
- There is good provision for pupils with learning difficulties and those with special educational needs.
- The quality of teaching and learning in English and Mathematics is good.

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

- It is recommended that the school should review its approach to short-term planning and to the way it records progress each month.
- It is recommended that a greater degree of in-class parental involvement at infant level should be facilitated and that a report on the various home-school initiatives be provided to the board of management each year.
- The approach to providing in-class support in English and Mathematics should be reviewed.

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.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board wishes to thank the inspectors for their courtesy and professionalism during the WSE process. The staff welcome the many positive comments and suggestions made by the inspectors during the classroom visits.

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 staff is currently working on developing a common template for use as a monthly progress report.
- The school will endeavour to involve parents more in class at the junior levels starting with weekly storytime sessions in the current school year. The HSCL co-ordinator will report to the Board on all activities each year.
- The school has reviewed its provision of Learning Support at senior levels and is currently trialling blocks of intensive in-class station teaching to improve specific areas of concern.