WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Scoil na mBuachaillí Clonakilty, County Cork was undertaken in November 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in English, Mathematics and Geography. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Scoil na mBuachaillí is one of six schools in the parish of Clonakilty in West Cork. Located in the town of Clonakilty, the school is an all-boys school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
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<td>Special needs assistants</td>
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1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

Official literature promotes Scoil na mBuachaillí as an inclusive community-centred school which endeavours to assist each individual pupil reach his full potential in a supportive and stimulating environment. The practices and daily routines of the school are in harmony with that ideal and the school is a focal point around which a broad range of community activity occurs.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management of Scoil na mBuachaillí is properly constituted and fully cognisant of its unique leadership role within the local community. Members engage positively with all other partners and stakeholders and strive to provide an optimal level of resources and facilities in support of a broad and balanced range of curricular and co-curricular learning activities and educational opportunities. An obvious commitment to improvement and innovation was evident from the board and they expressed unequivocal support for the principal and the teaching staff as well as satisfaction with the standards of educational provision in the school.

The board meets regularly and is involved in all aspects of educational provision within the school community. Minutes are recorded satisfactorily and care is taken in the maintenance of the school’s financial records.
1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team consists of the principal, deputy principal and six special duties post-holders. All posts carry an agreed allocation of curricular, administrative and pastoral duties and these are subject to regular review. Formal bi-monthly meetings are held, outside of school hours by the in-school management team, and individual members play an active and very visible leadership role within the school community. Information is disseminated effectively throughout the school community by the team through formal and informal channels. Post holders report on their respective roles and responsibilities at staff meetings. All other staff members display a strong sense of loyalty to the school’s goals and they support one another professionally and personally. The in-school management team contributes significantly to the positive morale that is evident throughout the school community.

1.4 Management of resources.

A high level of resource provision in support of a broad and balanced curriculum is a notable feature of the school. All available space has been cleverly adapted for appropriate use. Classroom space is sufficient to ensure the safety of pupils and staff members and it facilitates the application of a broad range of methodologies in teaching and learning. Furniture and fittings were observed to be in an appropriate state of repair. A wide range of audio-visual and ICT equipment, printed materials, library books and specialist equipment (telescope, film and musical equipment) is available in the school to support teaching and learning and for other specialist projects. These resources are integrated into the daily work of the school and serve to create and maintain high levels of pupil involvement in a wide variety of community-based events and activities. These events include masses, Christmas pageants, carol singing services, school and community concerts and an end-of-year school musical which is written, produced and performed by pupils under the guidance of staff members.

The teaching staff is suitably deployed to maximise their talents and experiences in support of highly effective teaching and learning in all classes. Staff rotation practices are guided by the needs of pupils and by the evolving and changing circumstances of the school. Ample opportunity exists for individual teachers to experience a broad range of classroom contexts and age groups. Additional staff members include 9 special needs assistants who make a significant contribution to the welfare of individual pupils and to the general life of the school. The school also has a full-time school caretaker and a full-time secretary who perform their respective duties to a high standard.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The management, principal and staff of Scoil na mBuachaillí are acutely aware of the need to promote their school and reach out to the local community in a variety of ways. An open door policy exists with regard to engaging with all partners, stakeholders and relevant professional bodies. The school is an attractive and stimulating building and visitors are exposed to a large display of photos, film and project displays which adorn reception and communal areas. Information is shared through newsletters and by means of an impressive school website. Pastoral and co-curricular activities are aligned with community interests and traditions and participation in major community events is encouraged.
The role of parents as the primary educators of their children is acknowledged by the school authorities and staff. All relevant educational data is shared with them through formal (parent-teacher meetings) and informal channels and they are given regular opportunities to participate in school life. Parents with particular expertise have been involved in activities such as art, pottery, music, sound recording, film and bird watching in support of regular school activities. The standing of the school in the local community is evident from the increased numbers of pupils seeking admission each year and from the growing involvement of the community in the general affairs of the school. Though an active parents’ association exists it was not, at the time of the evaluation, affiliated with the National Parents Council (NPC)

1.6 Management of pupils

The positive nature of relationships between teachers and pupils is a marked feature of Scoil na mBuachaillí. At the time of the evaluation pupils were observed to be well behaved, courteous and considerate. They exhibited a strong sense of belonging to their school community and were motivated to learn and to participate in a wide variety of educational opportunities. Many were participating in projects which necessitated attendance outside of normal school hours (basketball, GAA, chess, music and film, orienteering and astronomy) and they generally responded well to effective teaching consistent with their abilities.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

Whole-school planning is very good in Scoil na mBuachaillí and a comprehensive range of curricular and administrative plans was reviewed during the course of the whole-school evaluation. All of these plans have been developed over time using collaborative methods. Parents have been consulted where appropriate and all relevant plans have been ratified by the board. Curricular plans describe the unique circumstances of the school and set realistic objectives for learning in all subject areas. These are available electronically in all classroom settings using a secure staff area on the school website. This process has been led by the principal with the assistance of the deputy principal and is a useful guide to the work of the school community.

The teachers had relevant classroom planning documentation to support their practice. Their plans were structured, outcomes focused and showed an awareness of individual pupils’ strengths and challenges and indicated that a wide variety of styles were in use. Appropriate methods were used to maximise pupil achievement and suitable resources were available in all settings. It is advised that individual teacher planning templates be devised and agreed in order to refine and clarify the objectives of the pleán scoile in all curricular areas at each class level.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Department of Education and Skills Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools (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.
3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 English

English is the mother tongue of the majority of pupils in Scoil na mBuachaillí and is the principal medium of instruction. The principal and staff acknowledge the centrality of language and literacy development as fundamental to effective learning in every area of the curriculum and, consequently, the prioritisation of literacy development as a key cornerstone of learning is a notable feature of the work of the school. A range of suitable programmes and interventions such as reading recovery, literacy lift off and early intervention strategies are made available in support of that general aim.

Language proficiency, communication skills, reading abilities and written work of pupils were observed to be, generally, of an age-appropriate standard and the success of the school’s literacy programme was evident in a number of classrooms and in the reading recovery and literacy lift off settings. Throughout the school, standardised test scores indicated satisfactory levels of achievement in literacy and structured, time-bound interventions were made available to individual pupils experiencing difficulty. Good practice was also observed in relation to the early identification of pupils with specific literacy needs. Appropriate and carefully guided intervention strategies within specific timeframes were used to good effect in that important context and supportive additional reading material was available throughout the school.

Good teaching was observed in a range of classroom settings and English classes were presented in a lively and stimulating fashion in print-rich environments with appropriate supportive reading and reference material. The written work of pupils in a wide variety of genres was celebrated and displayed in classrooms and in school circulation areas and pupil engagement and achievement levels were observed to be satisfactory. In classroom settings pupils were engaged and motivated and their developing language skills facilitated the use of talk and discussion, questioning and research as key learning strategies.

3.2 Mathematics

Mathematics education in Scoil na mBuachaillí is developed incrementally across the classes with an appropriate emphasis on active learning methodologies and the practical application of mathematical skills and concepts. All classrooms are well resourced for that purpose and pupils are afforded ample opportunity to engage in the practical manipulation of numbers and materials in real-life contexts using the skills of estimation, prediction and problem solving. ICT is used effectively to enliven the teaching and learning process and there is an appropriate emphasis on mathematical language.

The mathematics lessons observed had clear objectives, involved age-appropriate methodologies and were outcomes focused. Pupils used mathematical skills and concepts with understanding and undertook assigned tasks with confidence. Teachers played an active role in stimulating pupils’ thinking and used good questioning techniques to generate enthusiasm and a sense of curiosity and fun. Homework is used effectively to consolidate learning and the work of pupils is carefully monitored and regularly corrected.
Assessment data are used to refine learning objectives, where appropriate, and children experiencing difficulty are supported by purposeful collaboration between the relevant support teachers and the classroom teacher. Standardised test results in mathematics indicated satisfactory levels of pupil achievement in mathematics.

3.3 Geography

School planning documentation shows an awareness of the key principles and essential elements of the Geography curriculum and there is a sustained effort made to develop a sense of place and space using the local environment as a starting point. The investigative skills of exploration and field work are developed through engagement with the environs of the school and the home. Pupils are encouraged to recognise, observe and record the features of the local environment and through this investigative process their local identity, their spatial awareness and their observational powers are enhanced. Work is progressed in the local, national, European and global contexts as pupils mature and a growing sense of citizenship was evident in the senior pupils in the school. Geography classes are appropriately resourced and maps, assorted globes and appropriate software are used to enliven the study of the Earth, its inhabitants and the interrelationships between them.

The school corridors and circulation areas are adorned with photographs and archival material which stimulate interest in the local community and develop an awareness of people and places of interest in the immediate environment of the school. Another notable feature of the work of the school was the production by senior pupils of interactive CDs and film projects which explored aspects of the physical and human local environments. These were high quality productions and excellent examples of the successful application of technology to learning.

The school has embraced the principles of the Primary School Curriculum successfully and there is an appropriate balance between content, concepts and skills. Advice was given with regard to the relevance of prescribed class texts given the emphasis on exploration and discovery inherent in the principles of the Geography curriculum and on the value of sourcing appropriate visitors to enhance learning in key aspects of the Geography programme.

3.4 Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of planning, teaching and learning in the school. A broad range of assessment methods is used and information is collated, stored and used to inform planning. Assessment modes used include the Jackson Phonics, PAT screening test, Dolch Sight List, Aston Index, MIST test, Neale Analysis, Quest tests, the MALT tests and standardised tests in line with departmental guidelines and best practice.

In addition to formal testing procedures pupils’ work is regularly and consistently monitored. Homework is given purposefully in support of the developmental needs of pupils and teaching methods and subject content are matched, where possible, to the prior attainment of pupils. All relevant assessment data are shared with parents and guardians and a comprehensive knowledge of the short-term and long-term needs of each pupil informs planning at individual teacher level in the majority of cases.

Assessment practices within the school are a significant factor in the structuring and maintenance of high quality educational experiences for pupils of all abilities and experiences.
4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Currently, a considerable number of pupils require support under the low incidence category as defined by departmental guidelines. They are well supported and effectively integrated within the school community. Dedicated support is provided by an experienced team of 9 support teachers and every effort is made to allow these pupils achieve their potential in a mainstream setting. All support teachers work in a variety of roles ranging between resource, learning support and English as an additional language and employ a wide variety of teaching methods and strategies. These include individual and group withdrawal, in-class support as well as team, station and parallel teaching, where appropriate.

They are assisted by a dedicated team of 8 SNAs who are assigned to the school to meet the needs of individual pupils. It is school policy to rotate SNAs or to use them in group support contexts in the best interest of achieving optimal levels of independence for pupils. All pupils within this category of support have well constructed IEPs which are collaboratively devised and progress records are carefully maintained and used to inform learning objectives and measure outcomes.

Pupils requiring short term intervention under the high incidence category of support are initially identified through screening tests such as the Belfield Infant Assessment Test. Infant pupils in need are further tested using the principles of the reading recovery programme and, once every twenty weeks, four additional pupils are supported by the resident reading recovery teacher. All senior infants and first class pupils are supported, where necessary, using the literacy lift off programme. Additional individual pupils requiring attention are identified and supported using the staged approach and all interventions are reviewed and re-evaluated within specific time frames.

Support is provided in literacy and numeracy and the work, which is managed by the principal and senior colleagues, is co-ordinated by dedicated teams of experienced teachers who promote collaboration and disseminate information effectively throughout the school.

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

A number of pupils are supported though the services of a Resource Teacher for Travellers (RTT) post which is shared. This work, which is done by two experienced teachers who are job sharing, is of a consistently high standard and the co-ordination, planning and implementation of the agreed programme are exemplary.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The school is a secure and stimulating environment for teaching and learning with adequate space and a high level of resource provision which motivates pupils to become active agents in their own educational development.
- The school has a dedicated, effective board of management, an effective principal, an efficient in-school management team and a dedicated teaching and ancillary staff.
• The school has an agreed vision supported by clear goals and objectives which stimulate a constant agenda for change and improvement across a broad range of areas.
• The principal is a dynamic individual who exerts a positive influence on the school community and who guides practice from a position of authority and a clear understanding of his role as an instructional leader.
• The teaching staff is a dedicated and professional team who display a willingness to put the pupil at the heart of learning and who are prepared to adapt and develop professionally in the interest of evolving or changing school needs or circumstances.
• The school is a key focal point in the local community and enjoys strong parental, community and business support.
• High expectations exist with regard to pupil achievement levels and a wide variety of co-curricular opportunities are available, within and outside of the formal school day, in support of that objective.

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’s Parents’ Association consider the advantages of affiliation with the National Parents’ Council (NPC) as per departmental guidelines and good practice.
• It is recommended that agreed common templates for individual long term and short term planning be devised to further enhance planning and to improve the connectivity between broad curricular aims, whole-school interpretations of these aims and specific age-appropriate learning objectives in each class.

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.

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