Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Bunscoil Mhuire
O’Brien’s Place,
Youghal,
Co. Cork
Uimhir rolla: 20024C

Date of inspection: 12 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Bunscoil Mhuire was undertaken in March, 2010. 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, Irish, Mathematics and Science. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Bunscoil Mhuire is a co-educational national school situated in the picturesque seaside town of Youghal in East Cork. The school was constructed in 1969 as a Presentation Convent Primary School for girls and in 1995, the former Christian Brother’s Primary School for boys amalgamated with the convent school and both schools were accommodated on the convent campus. Pupils in the main are drawn from the immediate environs of the town and enrolment trends indicate an overall steady increase over the past number of years.

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

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<tr>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
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<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
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<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
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<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

Bunscoil Mhuire is under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cloyne. The school aims to promote the full and harmonious development of all pupils, intellectually, culturally, morally and spiritually. It strives to ensure an appropriate education is provided for the benefit of each pupil and seeks to ensure that pupils reach their true potential, building a strong foundation for future endeavour. During the WSE, it was clear that the mission and vision for the school were being implemented through the clear leadership provided and the dedicated input of teachers.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is an effective body and its members are committed to the work of the school and to the ongoing welfare of its pupils. It is properly constituted and has a clear understanding of its responsibilities in the management and development of all aspects of school life. Meetings of the board are convened monthly and minutes are maintained. Board members have been allocated specific tasks which they undertake competently. School finances are audited.
annually; they are managed by the school secretary/personal assistant, and are then presented to
the treasurer at each board meeting. The board is involved in the whole-school planning process
and ratifies school policies as they are developed. Members of the board have attended
information meetings related to their roles and responsibilities and are anxious to access further
training in this area. The board is committed to the provision of a safe and comfortable
environment and to the continuous improvement of facilities within the school. A grant for
€250,000 was sanctioned by the Department of Education and Skills in June 2009 for a four-
classroom extension. Progress by the board in utilising this fund has been unnecessarily slow and
the board is urged to expedite this development as a matter of urgency.

1.3 In-school management

After many years of dedicated service, which included overseeing the amalgamation of the
Christian Brothers primary school with Bunscoil Mhuire in 1994, the previous principal retired in
2006. As a member of the Presentation Order, she gave 20 years of dedicated service in the
school and pioneered the integration of special needs pupils into mainstream schooling during
that time. The school’s direct link with the Presentation Order was maintained up to 2007 when
the remaining member of the Order in the school retired. The new principal commenced duties in
September 2006 and hopes to continue building on the legacy of the Presentation Order. He also
hopes to bring the school forward in a number of new directions.

The in-school management team is comprised of the principal, the deputy principal, two assistant
principals and eight special duties teachers. A further personal assistant/secretary appointed by
the board of management attends the in-school management team meetings. She has been
assigned responsibility for the majority of administrative duties in the school. This allows the
principal the added freedom to concentrate on his instructional leadership role. The principal
maintains a regular visible presence among staff, pupils and parents. He visits classrooms
regularly and engages with the pupils frequently in the course of these visits. He is committed to
developing a supportive and inclusive learning environment where the welfare of the child
assumes primary importance. His leadership style is purposeful and informed by a clear vision for
the school. Under his tenure, the school has become involved in a number of significant
educational initiatives that have played a major part in the school’s noteworthy success in terms
of educational standards and in the overall service provided to pupils and their parents. These
initiatives include special literacy programmes, such as *Literacy Lift-off* and *Reading Recovery*
which are proving to be very successful. The principal is also aware of his managerial role and
seeks to manage the physical development of the school in a proactive and dedicated manner. He
is very aware of school population growth patterns in Youghal and its implications for the school.
The principal and the board of management in this school acknowledge and support initiative in a
very positive way. The professionalism of the teachers is acknowledged and all teachers are given
encouragement to innovate, to be pro-active and to develop.

The fuller in-school management team has undergone considerable change in recent years with a
number of retirements. The deputy principal took up her duties shortly before the WSE
commenced. During the evaluation it was very clear that she is settling into her new role and has
views as to how to assist in leading curriculum development in the years ahead. The other
members of the team have specific duties which are fulfilled conscientiously and which
contribute beneficially to the overall administration and development of the school. The in-school
management team meets once a month and reports to staff meetings as the need arises. At this
juncture in the school’s history, it would be worthwhile reviewing the in-school management
structures in order to develop systems further. It is advised that the in-school management team
work together on developing curricular priorities and initiatives for the years ahead as well as
reviewing roles and duties to meet future needs. This would help create a more cohesive in-school management structure with a shared vision for the future development of the school. To this end it would be worthwhile for the board to support delegated members of the in-school management team to visit other schools of similar size in order to formulate proposals based on the experience of others.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The meeting with members of the parents’ association revealed that a very positive relationship exists between the school and the general parent body. Parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the standard of education provided for their children. The parents’ association is affiliated to the National Parents’ Council and a number of parents have received training. They meet on average once per month; they support the school with a shared sense of purpose as in their development of the school garden, in fundraising, in organising events and in accompanying teachers on school trips. The success of parents’ on-going fundraising activities has resulted in the provision of a wide range of additional learning resources for the school. Parents are also involved in supporting delivery of the Curriculum through helping with reading in the junior classes and through the literacy lift-off initiative. A group of parents takes pupils for cookery classes from fifth class and this activity is supervised by the class teacher.

The school recognises the value of good communication in building trust and respect between home and school. To this end a newsletter is issued each term, detailing school activities and notable successes. Relevant information is conveyed to parents also by means of the school journal, the school notice board, the school website and through the text-a-parent facility. Parents of new pupils due to enter the school are inducted by means of an open day at which information covering personnel, practices and procedures is issued. Parents are encouraged to visit and discuss their children’s progress through formal parent-teacher meetings, held twice each year. At these meetings parents are guided through an interpretation of the results of the pupils’ standardised test scores. Alternatively, as concerns arise, parents may make use of the agreed appointments system.

The school makes its facilities available to the wider community. Classrooms are utilised for meetings by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland and the school hall is used for performance by the local choral society.

1.5 Management of pupils

The pupils in this school are courteous, friendly and cooperative. The pupils and teachers interact in a respectful and friendly manner and there is a strong ethos of mutual care evident in the classrooms. The pupils cooperate with the teachers and participate fully in lessons. During classroom visits the pupils were confident in their answers and were at all times anxious to share their knowledge of facts, their understanding of concepts and their general learning with the Inspectors. The teachers’ success in ensuring pupil interest and participation in lessons is due to the stimulating methodologies employed by the staff and the use made of resources. The school has its required safety, supervision, discipline and behaviour policies in place to guide the management of the pupils.
2. **QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING**

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The school is engaging diligently in the planning process and has prepared a comprehensive school plan which contains over 30 administrative policies and statements covering all aspects of school life. The policies are written clearly and are very helpful documents for administering the school. The plan is supplemented by 15 appendices containing practical information regarding the policies. All policies were updated and ratified by the board of management in February 2010. Teams of teachers helped develop the school plan and parents and board of management members were involved. The school has made all its plans available electronically on the school website and this openness is very beneficial to the whole school community.

For the purposes of this evaluation, the curricular plans for Irish, English, Mathematics and History were examined. Teachers have devoted considerable time and effort to ensuring that these plans are useful documents to guide their work. Their usefulness can be determined by the emphasis on concrete decisions taken at a whole school level in the subjects under evaluation. For example, in *Gaeilge*, helpful suggestions are made for the integration of Irish with other subjects. The Mathematics programme is very helpful and provides teachers with agreed strategies for teaching strands of the curriculum. Emphasis is also placed on collaborative and cooperative learning, problem solving, using the environment and assessment. Resources mentioned in the plan include a comprehensive list of websites. The English plan reflects the current emphasis of the school regarding the promotion of literacy and overall the plan is a very beneficial aid to individual teacher planning. The History plan is very useful, comprehensive and practical. It lists websites, packs for topics, storybooks, biographies and novels that can be used for History lessons. Also, resources for local History are included in the documentation.

The overall high quality of whole-school planning is reflected in classroom planning. Most teachers devote considerable time and energy to ensuring that pupils receive instruction in a well-planned manner in line with the requirements of the Curriculum and the whole-school plan. Many classroom plans are well-thought out and have good structure and detail and include long-term and short-term schemes of work. Teachers’ planning is particularly effective where the learning intentions for pupils are outlined clearly. It is recommended that this good practice be adopted by all teachers. The considerable time and energy which many teachers devote to preparing and organising resources is acknowledged. This valuable work ensures the provision of attractive and engaging learning environments for their pupils. Monthly progress records are maintained by all teachers. These reports were developed by staff on a school development planning day. A number of different formats are currently in use. It is recommended that consideration be now given to implementing a common template throughout the school.

2.2 Child protection policy and procedures

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

3.1 Language

Irish

Some very good practice in the teaching and learning of Irish was observed in many class levels. A commendable emphasis is placed on rhyme, poetry and story in many classes. In some classrooms a range of methodologies and resources is deployed ably in order to teach a targeted language input and engage the pupils in a most productive manner. It is recommended that this good practice be implemented in all classrooms and that the communicative approach to teaching Irish be further developed on a whole-school basis. It is apparent that pupils enjoy learning Irish and demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning. However, the development of pupils’ communication skills requires further attention. It is therefore, advised that staff provide pupils with more opportunities to use the language through the use of group work and pair work. It would benefit pupil achievement if consideration was given to teaching other aspects of the curriculum through the medium of Irish. The good practice in evidence at particular class levels in relation to the careful cultivation of pupils’ reading is acknowledged. A range of reading material is used in some classrooms to facilitate the development of reading. It is recommended that this good practice be extended throughout the school. Pupils engage in a lot of functional writing activities. It would benefit the development of pupils’ writing skills if pupils were to experience a greater variety of writing genres. It is also recommended that free writing activities be extended throughout the school.

English

The work in English in this school is characterised by high standards of teaching overall, print-rich environments in the classrooms and excellent displays both in the classrooms and in the corridors. This school has achieved noteworthy success in raising standards of achievement in literacy over the past 5 years. The results of standardised testing in literacy demonstrate consistent improvement with the number of pupils performing at higher levels of achievement rising year on year.
year. This improvement is due in the main to the school’s drive to improve standards by adopting special programmes, including Literacy Lift-off and Reading Recovery. The dedication involved has paid off and will continue to pay off into the future as the school continues to monitor standards with noteworthy professionalism.

The work in the individual classes bears testimony to the overall vision that seeks to drive standards higher. The clarity which epitomises teaching in the school can be traced back to the clarity of whole school and individual teacher planning where objectives, content and strategies are clearly stated. In the junior section of the school, pre-reading activity is taught competently and sound development of pupils’ phonological awareness is in evidence. Word-attack skills are very well developed as are writing skills. A variety of teaching approaches are used incorporating whole-class, group, pair and individual learning; direct teaching, discovery learning, and active learning. The Literacy lift-off intervention is organised very efficiently. During this activity pupils engage in practice of a familiar book, preparation for reading a new book, practice of phonics and practice of free writing. The practice of free writing shows pupils are making very good writing progress. The successful use of free writing in the infant and junior classes is leading teachers to question use of directed writing as a predominant model. There are noteworthy displays of print in the classrooms and a lot of resources including books are available. There is a beneficial emphasis on word attack skills and learning poetry and handwriting is practised regularly.

In the middle section of the school, teachers build successfully on the foundations that have been laid earlier. The Literacy Lift-off (LLO) activities continue and are supplemented by other interventions including peer tutoring with in-class support from the resource teacher and the SNA. This peer tutoring intervention is very well organised and encourages full participation and engagement by all the pupils. Personal dictionaries have been compiled and good standards of recording in copies are in evidence. Good variety in writing activity is also in evidence and pupils learn and recite poetry with confidence. In the senior classes, the LLO continues to be organised very efficiently with three groups involved in assisted reading and two groups engaged in writing activities. The writing activities are formal question/answer or work on language. There is a need to include more creative free writing in these classes as part of the LLO programme.

In the middle and senior classes, pupils have undertaken very interesting work on class novels. Pupils have written on their reaction to novels and have put this in very attractive classroom displays. A good indicator of the success of teachers with class novels was that in one class, pupils expressed sadness at the fact they were coming to the end of the work on their class novel to the Inspectors. Discreet oral language lessons are taught. In one instance in the senior classes, the teacher encourages the pupils to research oral presentations and make the presentations to the class. This is very good practice. Pupils can recite poetry confidently and process writing is used to produce high standards of finished products. There is also good variety in the genres of writing in evidence in pupils’ writing.

3.2 Mathematics

The school plan developed for Mathematics serves as an informative guide for teaching the curriculum throughout the school. It is comprehensive in nature, outlining key methodologies, collaborative learning processes, problem-solving strategies, an extensive list of websites and an inventory of resources. It also outlines a clear and agreed approach to the use of mathematical language at each class level. An examination of mathematical scores attained in standardised tests demonstrates that pupils are making steady progress in accordance with age and ability. Teachers have identified a cohort of pupils who are experiencing difficulty across a number of strands and have been proactive in addressing these needs. A variety of approaches has been
introduced to differentiate the curriculum to cater for pupils’ individual needs, that include whole-
class teaching, group and pair-work and individualised programmes of work conducted by the
special needs team.

Teachers present content clearly and provide appropriate structured learning activities. Designated areas for Mathematics and high-quality charts which support pupils’ learning feature prominently throughout the school. In the junior classes the recitation of number rhyme is widespread and is utilised to good effect to promote pupils’ understanding. A productive engagement in group work activity is a feature in many classrooms, with key roles assigned to pupils during designated tasks. Concepts are explored extensively with questions from pupils actively encouraged and answered in a consistent and inclusive manner. The development of pupils’ mathematical language is addressed in a consistent manner; the use of concrete material is purposeful and is recognised by teachers as a productive means of developing understanding.

Pupils are active in their learning and engage frequently in hands-on discovery learning processes. An appropriate emphasis on skill development was much in evidence during learning activity. In a number of classes observed, a range of games and mental mathematical activity was used effectively to enable pupils develop and consolidate their learning and this worthwhile activity could be usefully extended to all classes. An examination of copybook activity reveals work is presented to a high standard by pupils and is marked positively by teachers. Information and communication technology is utilised effectively to support pupils’ learning.

3.3 History

In the junior classes, story is used wisely to develop understanding of chronology. In addition, the pupils’ sense of history is developed by comparing old and new objects. It is clear that teaching is resource based in these classes. In one instance, the teacher brought in her own toys from when she was young and made use of the computer to show clips of adults talking about their toys when they were young. This is very much making History concrete for the pupils. In another instance pupils brought in photos of themselves at various stages of their growth. It was then followed by a relevant and well chosen story which led to follow-on work on a human timeline. Overall these approaches are well thought out and therefore very successful.

As pupils progress to the middle and senior classes, the work in History involves more extended topic work and more use of projects. Pair work and group work feature regularly in lessons and pupils are trained to report back to the class on their findings. In addition, the displays are of a high standard and demonstrate interest on the part of the pupils. In one instance, a teacher has completed a degree in Roman and Greek civilisation and shares her enthusiasm for the period with the class. Projects, use of websites and sourcing books to aid the projects make the work in History fascinating for the pupils. The results of the pupils’ research are recorded neatly in both copies and for displays. In other instances, teachers use very active pair work quizzes to make History interesting. Work on local History is a particular feature of work in the senior classes and the rich historical past of Youghal has been explored in photographs, visits and artefacts. In other classes, integration of History with English, in particular with English novels is used with high levels of effectiveness. Literature in the context of the 1916 rising and WW2 proved to be useful springboards for effective History lessons. The place of women in History is also explored most effectively in the senior classes.
3.4 Assessment

A good range of assessment tools is used to determine pupils’ understanding of concepts and the knowledge they have acquired. In most classes teachers closely observe pupils during activities and carefully monitor their work. Records of individual pupils’ progress based on teachers’ observations are maintained in some classes, and this good practice should be extended to all classes. Standardised tests are administered to pupils in English and in Mathematics. The results of standardised testing are monitored on a whole-school basis and represented graphically to ascertain how such information could aid teaching and learning. The creation of a whole-school perspective on pupil achievement has led to the introduction of a number of focused initiatives in an effort to improve performance at a whole-school level. A deeper analysis of assessment results in some mainstream classrooms is required to inform provision of differentiated programmes.

4. Quality of Support for Pupils

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

The school policy, together with the appointment of a special needs coordinator provides clear direction for the implementation of effective practice. The school has introduced a range of early intervention strategies to address pupils’ learning needs. A concerted effort is made to keep numbers small in the junior classes to maximise teacher intervention and input. Of late the teachers have focussed their energies on improving literacy standards in the school. To this end In–class interventions have been introduced and have proven to be most successful in raising pupil achievement. Staff has identified the raising of standards in numeracy for future development. The school has documented policies on the admission, enrolment, and participation of pupils with special needs in the school plan. These are informative and are in accordance with the school’s caring ethos. It is now appropriate that the elements relating to the acceptance of pupils with special educational needs be amended to comply with current legislation under the Equal Status Act (2000). The school is also advised to incorporate the terms of Special Education Circular 02/05 to reflect the staged approach to assessment, identification and programme planning for pupils.

The school was granted an extra teacher for a special class in recent years. However, management and teachers decided that the needs of the children would be best served within the context of regular learning support and the special class is no longer in operation. The special education team in the school consists of five full-time and two part-time learning support/resource teachers. They constitute a diligent and competent team. They meet regularly in the processes of planning and review of programmes of intervention. Results from standardised tests are used purposefully in the identification of pupils with learning difficulties. The compiling of individual education plans is an efficient process. Class teachers, parents, and special education assistants (SNA) are consulted widely and a coordinator is nominated in each case to compile the agreed document. The detail therein is prepared on the basis of a careful diagnosis of needs and is characterised by a measured degree of detail and relevance. Plans include specific targets and a clear timeframe for review is identified. The addition of diagnostic testing at review stage is recommended to further inform learning targets.

Judicious use is made of a range of resources to support pupils’ learning, including the use of ICT. Imaginative and focussed programmes are prepared in accordance with deliberations and ongoing assessments. As part of the Reading Recovery programme, a series of comprehension activities to supplement the reading of the books has been devised for parents and this initiative is
most impressive. The teachers involved are to be complimented for their dedication. Support is provided on a withdrawal basis, either individually or in small groups, and is effectively complemented with in-class support. Selected groups are chosen for Mathematics tuition and are taught a modified programme, based on an analysis of needs and separate to that taught in the mainstream class setting. During the evaluation the need to further monitor the impact of these approaches on pupil learning was highlighted and discussed positively. As a development point staff might usefully consider further cooperative teaching approaches, to allow learning-support teachers to co-teach in mainstream classrooms. Teachers give careful attention to the promotion of problem-solving skills where regular linkage is made to real life situations to facilitate greater understanding.

Four pupils diagnosed with dyspraxia are in receipt of occupational therapy sessions. Routines here are well organised and practice contributes positively to the development of pupils’ fine and gross-motor skills. Most support teachers record pupil progress in the form of a daily diary and work completed is recorded in a cuntas miosuíl template at the end of each month. Consideration could usefully be given to devising an agreed approach to maintaining progress records, as a reflective practice that would regularly inform long-term and short-term plans.

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

Thirty-eight pupils are in receipt of language support. The staff makes a noteworthy effort to create an inclusive environment for newcomer pupils with a variety of initiatives firmly established in the school. Following assessment, utilising the Primary School Assessment Kit, proficiency benchmarks are applied and are utilised appropriately in compiling creative learning programmes. Pupils enjoy their learning activities and are making good progress in oral language development. Staff succeed in creating print-rich learning environments where an appropriate range of resources is utilised effectively. Some pupils read fluently but present with comprehension difficulties. A combination of role play and story form the main features of language support. Pupils are withdrawn in groups to facilitate these activities. Collaboration with mainstream class teachers is facilitated through regular informal meetings. The staff is advised to consider ways in which in-class support structures and the use of language-support methodologies by classroom teachers can assist these pupils in the mainstream class setting, in advancing language proficiency. Language support lessons are conducted in a section of the school hall. It is recommended that consideration be given to the provision of more appropriate accommodation for language support. The language-support teacher’s initiative to personally undertake lessons in the Polish language is acknowledged.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The principal provides the school with informed leadership.
- The teachers are diligent and innovative and they are commended for their dedication to addressing the learning needs of all pupils.
- The school has formed a well-structured and effective support team to provide for pupils with special education needs.
- The board of management and the parents’ association are supportive, committed and keenly interested in the operation and development of the school.
• The school is very well-resourced and has an extensive range of educational equipment. Teachers present classrooms as attractive print-rich learning environments.
• Intervention strategies in literacy are very successful. The supplementary material produced as a further support in Reading Recovery is impressive.
• The creation of a whole-school perspective on pupil achievement is very good practice.

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

• The board is urged to progress the four classroom extension as a matter of urgency.
• At this juncture in the school’s history, it would be worthwhile reviewing the in-school management structures in order to develop systems further.
• It is advised that staff provide pupils with more opportunities to use Irish through the use of group work and pair work.
• The application of diagnostic testing to inform learning targets further is recommended.
• Staff is advised to consider ways in which in-class support structures in language-support can assist these pupils in the mainstream class setting.

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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