An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Rath na nÓg School, Castleblayney Children’s Centre
Castleblayney, Co Monaghan

Uimhir rolla: 20135L

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

This report has been written following a whole school evaluation of Rath na nÓg School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the work of the school as a whole and makes recommendations for the further development of the work of the school. During the evaluation, the inspectors held pre-evaluation meetings with the principal, the teachers and the school’s board of management. The evaluation was conducted over a number of days during which inspectors visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. They interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and interacted with the class teachers. They reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation, and met with various staff teams, where appropriate. Following the evaluation visit, the inspectors provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the staff and to the board of management. 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.

1. INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Rath na nÓg School was established in 2001. It is located in Rath na nÓg High Support Unit, Castleblayney, a high support, residential centre operated by the Health Services Executive (HSE). The school, and the high support unit within which it is located, initially provided residential and education services for children with high support care needs within the operational areas of Health Boards in the North East, North West, West and Midlands. The unit now provides a national service and may accept young people from across the state. The school is recognised and funded as a special school by the Department of Education and Skills. The school operates under the patronage of the HSE. School staff includes a principal, three class teachers, and an allocation of twenty five additional teaching hours per week. The school provides on-site education for young people who are resident in the High Support Unit (HSU). In certain limited circumstances non-resident students may be enrolled. At the time of inspection there were seven students on the school roll, of whom six were residents and one was a day student. One other student had recently transferred to alternative living arrangements and was not expected to return to the school.

Rath na nÓg HSU delivers high support residential care to children and young people, male and female, aged from twelve to eighteen years. Young people requiring high support care are likely to have had difficult and stressful life experiences. They have needs that, for the time being, cannot be met by other forms of care, such as fostering or conventional residential care. HSUs may be described as units providing special residential care, in that they offer high levels of care and supervision. Unlike special care units, HSUs are not defined as secure units. In Rath na nÓg, length of stay is reported to range from three to eighteen months; a stay of approximately six months might be typical. Care is delivered by residential care workers in two residential units that provide for a maximum of six residents each. At the time of this evaluation, capacity was restricted to a total of eight young persons. However, plans were being progressed with a view to extending the role of the centre to include a special care function in addition to the high support function. This will entail changes to accommodation and organisational arrangements, and will result in an increase in operating capacity to a total of twelve young persons.

The school operates on the basis of the primary school day and school year.

This report deals with the education provided by Rath na nÓg School. Rath na nÓg HSU is inspected by the Social Service Inspectorate under the auspices of the Health Information and
Quality Authority (HIQA). Terms such as school and staff will refer to the school or school staff, whereas terms such as centre will refer to the high support unit as a whole.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

2.1 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted in accordance with Department requirements; it is representative of patron, teachers, and carers and incorporates a broad range of relevant expertise from the local business and educational communities, as well as the HSU Director and a HSU care manager. The particular composition of the board has facilitated the development of positive links to the local community. Some members of the board have participated in board of management training facilitated by Monaghan Education Centre. The board meets once a term, with additional meetings as required. In this context, the board should bear in mind the requirement in the relevant Department guidelines that boards meet a minimum of five times per year. Minutes of meetings are maintained. The roles of secretary and treasurer have been assigned. Accounts are audited. Key policies have been developed and approved. It is clear that the board is actively engaged with the school and provides valuable support that is acknowledged and appreciated by the school staff.

2.2 In-school management

The principal provides supportive, effective leadership and efficient management and administration. She remains closely engaged with all elements of the school community. She promotes positive working relationships within the school staff and between the school and the high support unit. She maintains contact with the chairperson of the board of management and ensures that the board is kept informed in relation to the working of the school.

In addition to the principal, the school staff contains a deputy principal post and a special duties post. At the time of the evaluation the deputy principal was on leave of absence and the special duties teacher was acting in the role of deputy principal. The acting deputy principal provides valuable support to the principal in the running of the school. Both work in close collegial collaboration with the other staff members. A school policy document on in-school management outlines the rationale for delegation of responsibilities and a general outline of duties. It is recommended that the specific duties attached to in-school management posts be included in the school plan.

2.3 Management of resources

The school is well served by a committed, well-managed and resourceful staff team that brings commendable flexibility to its work. The staff members have a combination of primary and post-primary qualifications. All teachers work flexibly across the curriculum, while taking particular responsibility for specific areas. There is evidence of strong team cohesion, effective collaboration and a shared sense of responsibility for the development of the school as whole. Regular, minuted staff meetings are held. A policy statement in the school plan expresses the school’s commitment to staff development. The teachers’ commitment to pursuing continuing professional development that is relevant to the school’s mission is seen in their participation in a range of courses, including post-graduate studies, in-house courses and courses available through the Department’s support services.
In order to consolidate and build upon this commitment it is recommended that the school should carry out an audit of current and previous staff professional development and draw up a plan to guide future development activity.

School accommodation is of a high quality. It is well suited to the students’ needs and is attractively presented and well maintained. The school occupies one of a group of single-storey buildings that also includes the residential houses and an administration block. This cluster of buildings, dating from 2001, faces onto a large grassed area. A gymnasium block that has been added more recently is available to the school, the residents and groups from the local community. The school building includes two general-subjects classrooms, an art room, a home economics room, a general purpose room, principal’s office, staffroom and secretarial room. A room originally designated as a computer room is now used for curricular activities related to personal care and presentation, and the computers have been incorporated into the other classrooms. The staffroom has computer access and is used by staff for planning, for formal and informal meetings and as a staff resource area.

Classrooms are well resourced, with a wide range of materials to support a broad curriculum. The specialist areas for Home Economics and Art are well equipped to provide a suitable range of activities. Computers are available for staff and student use in all classrooms. Interactive whiteboards have been introduced in two classrooms. The general purpose room, outdoor area, and gymnasium provide for a range of games and sports. Department of Education and Skills grants have been used to build up a range of materials suitable for specific curricular areas.

2.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

The school’s relationships with the management and staff of the high support unit and with the wider community are positive and productive. The education staff and management and the residential care staff and management respect and value the contribution that each group makes to the well-being of the young people and are committed to the maintenance of effective communication and collaboration. A range of formal and informal structures for communication and collaboration are in place. Relevant information is exchanged at start and end of the day and at other times as required. The principal attends regular administration and management meetings within the centre and also attends a weekly clinical meeting at which unit managers and key workers discuss the progress of the young people in relation to the goals of their placement. Relevant and appropriate written reports are made available to the school to facilitate educational planning. School reports are placed on the centre’s files. The school and the centre have developed multiple links with educational and community groups within the local community.

2.5 Management of students

The management of the students in the school context is facilitated by good quality, regular communication between school and residence. In addition to daily internal phone contact a teacher designated as liaison teacher for a particular student is available to maintain ongoing contact. School attendance is strongly encouraged by the care staff. Attendance levels are good and where difficulties exist in relation to individual students, the school works in collaboration with the centre to rectify the situation. The school may call on assistance from care staff in response to dangerous behaviour on the part of students in the school setting. Such assistance is viewed as an emergency rather than a routine response and is rarely used. There is a strong positive emphasis in the school’s behaviour policy. Students sign a school contract that outlines clear expectations, while avoiding rigidity. A student weekly record tracks student engagement across the subjects and sections of the school day, and is linked to a small monetary reward.
3. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

3.1 School planning process and implementation

Significant work has been completed in relation to the development of the school plan. Policy documents have been drawn up covering a range of organisational and curricular areas. In general, organisational policies are clearly written and are capable of guiding the work of the school. The best examples provide an indication of how the policy has been developed and disseminated, clearly outline roles and responsibilities for implementation, are explicitly linked to the ethos and context of the school and indicate success criteria and a timeframe for review. A similar structure would be of benefit to all policies. Where appropriate, school policies have taken account of, or incorporate the equivalent centre policies.

In the area of curricular planning at whole-school level, programme content has been developed for a wide range of subject areas and for learning modules related to Junior Certificate, FETAC and the Primary School Curriculum. Templates have been designed to assist teachers in planning at classroom and individual student level.

While the range of curricular areas, subjects and modules that students may access is notably wide, some areas have a pivotal or cross-cutting significance in terms of the typical priority needs of the students. Student learning needs in literacy and numeracy, which are addressed particularly in English and Mathematics, can benefit from a whole-school, cross-curricular approach. Commendably, a policy statement emphasising the cross-curricular aspect of literacy and numeracy has been drawn up. This can be developed further by teachers as they identify opportunities and strategies for reinforcing literacy and numeracy skills in the context of lessons in other curricular areas. A similar approach would be relevant in relation to social and personal skills. It is recommended therefore that further work in whole-school curricular planning should focus particularly on broad cross-curricular areas such as literacy and numeracy, and social and personal development.

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 (Published September 2001). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and carers; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all 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.

3.2 Classroom planning

At classroom level, the teachers have developed an effective and efficient system of planning that is suited to the particular circumstances of the school. After an initial period of assessment, an individual education plan is drawn up using a standard template devised by the school. Monthly plans outline proposed learning for each student across subject areas and form the basis for daily and weekly planning and recording of progress. Collaborative practice among the teachers is well developed. Much planning activity is carried out by the teachers as a team. Student progress and
engagement are reviewed each week and reported by the principal at weekly meetings within the centre.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

4.1 Overview of learning and teaching

The curriculum provided by the school is broad, age-appropriate, balanced, relevant and flexible. It provides for active engagement, progress and certification. There is balance among academic areas, social and personal development and creative/practical areas. The curriculum draws on three main sources, namely, the Primary School Curriculum, Junior Certificate programmes, including the Junior Certificate School Programme, and FETAC modules. The curriculum provides a suitable choice of options for the students. It caters for the range of age and ability and allows for the revisiting of basic skills.

Teaching and learning take place in a flexible range of contexts. Small class size helps to ensure student engagement and provision of support. Combining of class groups and the use of team teaching helps to enrich the classroom experience. Classroom atmosphere is informal but purposeful.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is integrated into teaching and learning at classroom level. Interactive whiteboards, laptop and desktop computers and digital cameras are used by both teachers and students.

The level of student engagement in the learning activities is commendable, particularly in view of the previous disruptions in schooling experienced by some of the students. The students enjoy the practical emphasis in the curriculum, they talk with pride about their work and they demonstrate progress in attitudes and skills.

4.2 Language

English

Students are enabled to revisit aspects of oral language, reading and writing skills from primary level, where necessary, and to progress their skills and language experience through Junior Certificate programmes and FETAC Level 3. Students of more advanced ability or those who remain for longer periods of enrolment can progress to Level 4. The school’s literacy and numeracy policy indicates commitment to promoting literacy skills across the curriculum. A plentiful and varied supply of textbooks, workbooks and fiction ad non-fiction reading material is available to cater for students with different levels of ability. Classrooms are well laid-out; charts and illustrations relevant to literacy skills are on display. The students’ work is carefully monitored and maintained in well-presented personal folders. Teacher-made tests and checklists, in addition to standardised tests, are used to track progress.

4.3 Mathematics

In Mathematics, concepts and skills from the Primary School Curriculum are revisited and consolidated. Where necessary, compensatory work is provided in order to address deficits in learning. A flexible range of certification options is available through Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme and FETAC levels 3 and 4. The availability of a wide range of
textbooks, workbooks and other teaching resources, including computer software programmes, facilitates individualisation of instruction. Student progress is carefully monitored.

4.4 Social, Environmental and Scientific Education

Curriculum material associated with Social, Environmental and Scientific Education at primary level is continued and developed through suitable topics and activities linked to History, Geography and Science. Age-appropriate progression and broadening of the curriculum is facilitated in the context of FETAC modules such as Food and Cookery, Food and Nutrition Cultural Studies, History and Geography and Human Biology. The range of textbooks and reference material available in classrooms and the ready access to materials through the internet are particularly helpful in this curricular area.

4.5 Arts Education

Arts Education is a particularly well developed area of the curriculum. Within this area, Visual Arts is the main component in terms of formal programming and certification. The Art classroom is well resourced. Students may access FETAC Art and Design at Level 3 and FETAC Painting and Drawing at Level 4. The range and quality of work on display in the Art room and around the school is impressive. Students are actively engaged in activities and projects that are often linked to their interests. They explore a range of materials and techniques and show evidence of growing ability to develop an idea creatively. The Visual Arts activities are characterised by positive staff-student interaction and mutual support among the students.

The students listen to a range of music and are encouraged to participate in individual and group performance through singing and using contemporary instruments. Staff collaboration with a visiting musician works effectively in encouraging participation and performance. This activity provides a valuable context for development of self confidence among the students. At a more formal level, students may work on a FETAC Music Appreciation module or on JCSP music performance statements.

Drama techniques and methodologies are used effectively to support learning. A regular drama-based session focuses on self awareness, self esteem, and social skills. The session is well structured. Student engagement is helped by the fact that staff participate. Drama games and devices are used as a basis for discussion and reflection.

4.6 Physical Education

The facilities available for Physical Education, including the new gymnasium building and access to a swimming pool in a nearby town allow for the provision of a broad Physical Education programme that includes aquatics and indoor and outdoor team and individual sports. As the school staff does not contain a specialist PE teacher, the staff team is to be commended for the development of this area of the curriculum, bringing to bear their general teaching skills and their own sports’ experience. Boxing and hurling are among the sports that have been explored. The linking of interested students to local sports clubs is commendable.

4.7 Social, Personal and Health Education

Teachers have built on the foundations provided by the strands of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the Primary School Curriculum to provide a menu of programmes and
activities to suit different needs. The programmes offered incorporate material from the post-primary subject Civic, Social and Political Education. A number of FETAC modules contribute to the overall programme in this curricular area. These include Level 3 Communications, Personal and Interpersonal skills, Food and Cookery, Food and Nutrition, Personal Care and Presentation, and Preparation for Work, and Level 4 Communications, and Personal and Interpersonal Skills.

Relationships and Sexuality Education and substance abuse education are provided as part of the school’s standard programme. Lessons are delivered in single sex and mixed groups, as appropriate. Related biology aspects are covered in Science lessons.

Drama-based activities and the circle-time format are well used as a learning context for SPHE. Students enjoy participation in well organised Home Economics activities, involving food preparation and cookery. This subject area, in addition to the personal care and presentation lessons provides a valuable, activity-based context for development of specific personal and social skills and general self confidence.

4.8 Assessment

Assessment of learning and assessment for learning are well developed in the school. The school’s assessment policy document refers to the use of a range of assessment modes. Assessment modes in use include teacher observations, tests, curriculum checklists and standardised tests. While the conventional Junior Certificate provides summative, examination-based assessment of learning, the use of JCSP statements and FETAC checklists of specific learning objectives allows for continuous assessment. Assessment for learning begins at enrolment, through an initial assessment period leading to an initial individual plan, and continues as part of the teaching learning process thereafter. Well maintained student folders provide ongoing evidence of learning and enable students, with the teachers, to reflect on their own work. This concept of supported self-reflection is one that may have potential for further development, in order to enhance students’ learning skills and self-management skills.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

The favourable staff ratio, highly positive staff-student relationships, team-work among the teachers and the quality of communication between education and care staff combine to produce a highly supportive environment for the students. The broad and flexible curriculum, incorporating primary and post-primary elements, and the range of assessment and certification routes allow the teachers to engage the students, from the outset, in activities in which they can succeed. For students who experience learning difficulties or whose previous education has been significantly disrupted, the school can provide individualised support, revisiting foundation skills through a compensatory/remedial approach. School and centre personnel commented on the positive support previously provided by a psychologist who worked with the centre. At the time of the evaluation this provision was not available.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is well served by a cohesive, committed staff group.
• The evident positive teacher-student relationships are characterised by a balance between authority and informality.
• The school provision is highly valued and well supported within the centre.
• The school has established robust, mutually supportive links with the HSU management and care staff.
• The school and centre have positive links with the wider community.
• The broad and flexible curriculum, incorporating primary, post-primary and FETAC elements, allows teachers to actively engage the students at level appropriate to their needs and interests.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• It is recommended that the specific duties attached to in-school management posts be included in the school plan.
• It is recommended that the school carry out an audit of current and previous staff professional development and draw up a plan to guide future professional development activity.
• It is recommended that further work in whole-school curricular planning should focus particularly on broad cross-curricular areas such as literacy and numeracy, and social and personal development.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management where the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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