Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Fachnan and Saint Attracta’s National School
Kilfenora, County Clare
Uimhir rolla: 20149W

Date of inspection: 20 January 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Saint Fachnan and Saint Attracta’s National School was undertaken in January 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 Geography. The board of management of the school 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

Saint Fachnan and Saint Attracta’s National School is a four teacher mainstream primary school located in the historic village of Kilfenora in the north west of County Clare. The school, named after Saint Fachnan, was constructed in 1958 and extended in 1985. In 2001 the other school in the parish, St. Attracta’s in Inchovea, was closed and amalgamated with St Fachnan’s. From then on the name of the school was changed to reflect the history of both schools. Attendance levels are commendable.

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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<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
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<tr>
<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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<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

This school is under the patronage of the Catholic bishop of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora. The school’s mission statement emphasises the dignity and self-worth of each member of the school community. The school aims to foster in pupils a desire to contribute in a worthwhile way to the community in which they live, and to appreciate the rich cultural and historical legacy to which they are heirs.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management manages the affairs of the school in a satisfactory manner. It is properly constituted, meets regularly, and supports the work of the school conscientiously. Records of meetings are carefully maintained and the financial affairs of the board are prudently managed and recorded in commendable fashion. Accounts are certified annually in accordance with good practice. The chairperson, who was appointed in September 2009, visits the school frequently and works closely with the principal and staff. Members of the board have availed of some training, particularly in the areas of ethos and finance.
Board members were unanimous in their praise for the manner in which staff create a harmonious atmosphere for the education of the pupils. They were particularly pleased that pupils have access to a good range of extra curricular activities and that parents are well informed of matters pertaining to the education of their children. The goodwill of the parents and community at large towards the school was clearly evident in the help and support provided to deal with frost damage in January 2010. The school building and grounds are very well maintained, and improvements and maintenance are dealt with as necessary. The board’s current priorities include the further development of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure in the school and planned improvements in the school building, under the Department of Education and Science Summer Works scheme, which will take place in summer 2010.

In order that the newly appointed principal may devote more time to instructional leadership it behoves the board to increase its capacity to manage a range of areas. Board members could be encouraged to accept responsibility for areas such as health and safety and recording of minutes. The board has had limited involvement in the development of whole-school policies and should address this issue in the short-term and ensure that ratification of policies is formalised and recorded appropriately.

1.3 In-school management
Since her appointment in the summer of 2009 the principal has made commendable progress in adapting to the demands of the dual roles of teaching and leadership. She is conscious of maintaining the traditions of the school and has received considerable support from staff, board, parents and pupils since taking up the post. The principal is supported in her work by an effective and co-operative part-time secretary and other ancillary staff. Since her appointment the principal has succeeded admirably in building very good working relationships with stakeholders. She has availed of initial leadership training and has led a review of policy across a range of curricular and organisational areas. Among the challenges facing the principal at this time are the completion of a whole-school review and securing agreement on a strategic plan for the short to medium term development of the school. Developing further capacity in instructional leadership and the promotion of curricular review and development will be central to this work.

The in-school management team consists of a deputy principal and a privileged assistant. While the post-holders support the work of the principal in advancing the aims of the school, it is imperative that duties of post holders are agreed at the earliest opportunity, that these duties are approved by the board of management, and that mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency are attached to this work in accordance with Circular 07/03. Regular review of duties thereafter should become a permanent feature of the functioning of the in-school management team. The adoption of a policy on staff rotation would also be prudent at this time.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
In the absence of a parents’ association the inspector met with the elected parents on the board of management. These parents were very supportive of the work of the teachers in the school. They commented particularly on the perceived high levels of contentment among children and on the ease with which past pupils appeared to adapt to life in secondary school. Parents are welcome to make appointments to see teachers as necessary and formal parent-teacher meetings are organised after Christmas each year. Written reports of pupils’ progress are issued at the end of the school year. It is recommended that the board should facilitate the setting up of a parents’ association.
1.5 Management of pupils
Pupils in this school present as courteous, confident and co-operative. Teachers exhibit a genuine sense of care for the welfare of all pupils. They appreciate the support of parents in maintaining good discipline, positive relationships and a healthy working environment.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning
Commendable work has been done over the years, mainly at staff level, in formulating and agreeing policy statements on all areas of the curriculum and on a range of organisational issues. Where possible, assistance from the support services was availed of in carrying out this work. Organisational policies provide guidance on issues such as homework, record retention, behaviour, enrolment, internet use and the administration of medicine. Extensive work has been done on health and safety. Further development of the planning process should aim to ensure greater involvement by the partners in planning and recording of planning decisions.

Policies have been developed over time for all curriculum areas. Much useful work has been done to ensure that policies impact appropriately on classroom practice. As these policies are being reviewed every effort should be made to ensure that policies and plans are more carefully customised to the needs of the school. A strategic plan outlining priorities for development would enable the board, staff and parents to cope with the considerable body of work involved, in a manageable way.

The quality of classroom planning is good. All teachers plan conscientiously to deliver a broad and balanced programme of work. A common template has been agreed for short term planning and this template is appropriately adapted to record progress on a monthly basis. The good work in evidence could be further enhanced by closer alignment of planning objectives with curriculum content and greater emphasis on differentiating programmes to meet the needs of particular pupils.

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.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Language

Gaeilge
Breathnaiodh meid airthe dea-chleachtai i dteagas na Gaeilge i ngach rang. Trid an scoil cuirtear bheim fhuinteach ar leathnú foclóra agus ar chleachtaí scríofa bunaithe ar na leabhra atá in úsáid. Sna bun ranganna úsáidtear leabhair mhóra go sciliúil chun scéalta a insint. Baintear leas fónta as pictiúir agus ábhair choincréiteacha chun suim a mhúscailt sa teanga agus tuiscint na
English

English is taught proficiently throughout the school and this teaching is marked by a number of positive aspects. Pupils were observed to confidently discuss a range of topics. Oral language is given significant attention as a particular scheme is adhered to for discrete oral language lessons and teachers are conscious of developing confidence in expressive skills throughout the curriculum. Circle time, language games and guided discussion feature prominently among the methodologies employed. The presentation of poetry to senior pupils provides opportunities to compare and contrast poems for deeper meaning and to appreciate how words are used to achieve particular effects. Greater exploration of rhymes and poetry and the recitation of poetry throughout the school should further broaden the pupils’ experience of and facility with language.
Reading is taught effectively with some pupils achieving quite high standards. The majority of pupils read with confidence and good expression. Textbooks, large format books, class novels and library books provide broad and rich sources of reading material for pupils. A culture of reading for pleasure is cultivated through involvement in the Wow Reading Challenge and the promotion of shared reading. Parents are encouraged to become involved with the teachers in the quest for high standards in reading attainment. In the infant and junior classes much effort is expended in assisting pupils acquire the skills necessary to become fluent readers. Oral language activity, collaborative reading, the development of phonemic and phonological awareness and the introduction of a range of word identification strategies are prominent aspects of this work.

Pupils engage constructively in all class settings with many aspects of writing. Written work is appropriately neat, well presented and carefully monitored by the teachers. Pupils’ knowledge of the conventions of spelling is admirable. The school’s detailed handwriting policy provides for clear progression from letter formation to a fluent cursive style. This policy should be fully implemented at the earliest opportunity. All teachers promote the development of the writing process and a variety of writing genres are in evidence. Collaborative anthologies in infants, extensive work on responding to text in middle classes, and commendable efforts at personal writing in the senior section are prominent features of written work. Functional-oriented writing is heavily emphasised at the possible expense of greater exploration of more genres. It is recommended that the policy on writing be reviewed to ensure a greater emphasis on the writing process. More opportunities for free writing, drafting and editing, self editing and peer editing and the celebration of pupils’ writing could be considered in this context.

3.2 Mathematics
Good standards of achievement in Mathematics are achieved throughout the school. The school plan for Mathematics was formulated in 2007 and is particularly comprehensive in terms of providing guidance for the standardisation of certain mathematical procedures and for the teaching of mathematical language. Well-structured lessons were observed in which particular attention was paid to ensuring that concepts were clearly explained and developed constructively. Written work is neatly recorded and regularly monitored. Consolidation and review are regular features of lessons and it is recommended that mental and oral problem solving be included more regularly in lessons. Mathematical language is well taught and purposeful use of concrete materials and equipment enhances the progression of investigative approaches. It is essential that the use of materials and equipment extends to all classes. It is recommended that more rigorous analysis of the outcomes of testing at individual, class and whole-school level be carried out. Such analysis should enable teachers to focus on areas of the programme requiring further work, such as the solving of word problems and algebra.

3.3 Geography
Geography lessons observed were well structured and stimulating and featured an impressive range of material and activities. When questioned on work done pupils were adept at discussing a range of topics with enthusiasm. Pupils in junior and middle classes spoke knowledgably about their experience of early-mapping activities and of the Geography of the counties and provinces of Ireland. The geography of Ireland is taught imaginatively at a number of levels. In the junior and middle classes pupils’ investigative skills were commendably developed as they explored issues pertinent to environmental awareness and care.

Senior pupils completed a project on Italy using the facilities in the school’s computer room and they displayed competent knowledge of this work. In their exploration of maps, globes and graphicacy skills, senior pupils familiarised themselves with a basic knowledge of latitude and
longitude. ICT was appropriately used in this work to provide a comprehensive range of photographs, maps and remotely sensed images for discussion.

The Geography policy, which dates from 2008, indicates that an environmental audit has been carried out by staff. Further development of this plan would lead to agreement on aspects of the local environment which would be suitable for field work at each class level. Packs and resources could be developed to facilitate this work.

3.4 Assessment

The assessment practices of mainstream class teachers are satisfactory at all class levels. Teacher-devised tests and tasks are administered regularly. Samples of pupils’ work, including copybooks, in different areas of the curriculum are monitored and retained.

The Sigma-T, Micra-T and Drumcondra Spelling tests are administered annually to pupils in first to sixth classes. The MIST (Middle Infant Screening Test) is administered to pupils in senior infants. Last year, this testing was completed in June and the timing of the test did not facilitate the implementation of the Forward Together programme. It is recommended that the MIST be administered earlier (during the fifth school term) and this will allow both the infant class teacher and the learning support teacher to work collaboratively to implement an early intervention programme with pupils. Diagnostic tests such as the Neale Analysis of English Reading, the Aston Index and Quest are administered to further identify pupils’ specific needs.

Results from standardised tests are compiled and presented in the school plan for the different class levels. These results should provide more guidance on the pupils (less than the 12th percentile) who require additional supports. The assessment policy should be reviewed to ensure that the results of diagnostic and standardised tests are used to inform the provision of supports appropriate to the pupils’ stage of learning, both in mainstream class settings and in the learning support/resource settings.

4. Quality of Support for Pupils

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Appropriate provision is made for pupils with learning difficulties or special educational needs. The resource teacher and the shared learning-support/resource teacher work conscientiously. The resource teacher provides supports to one pupil. The learning-support teacher provides supports to all of first class, and individual pupils and groups of pupils are also included in the caseload. The teachers use a variety of effective approaches and methodologies in the course of their work. They affirm pupils regularly and challenge them to achieve to the best of their ability.

The learning support room is an attractive environment and is equipped with a range of teacher-devised and commercial materials. Both teachers use a range of materials to support teaching and learning. The provision of a range of reading materials for pupils in the learning-support setting is required so that pupils have a range of parallel readers to engage in familiar reading and new reading on a daily basis.

The quality of planning is satisfactory. Individual education plans and programmes for pupils are devised in consultation with the class teacher, the principal and parents and other professionals where appropriate. In general, the individual plans include learning targets to be achieved by the pupil within a defined period. It is recommended that, in accordance with the Learning-Support Guidelines, two plans should be devised annually for each pupil or group of pupils receiving
supports. It is also recommended that short-term plans, which would assist in the identification of more specific targets for pupils, would also be outlined. It is further advised that specific programmes and strategies which are designed to support pupils require a whole-school approach to ensure their collaborative implementation by mainstream class teachers as well as the learning-support teachers.

A comprehensive policy on learning support has been devised but its implementation needs to be reviewed at whole-school level. Many pupils receiving supports are in the average or above average range and they do not meet the criteria for inclusion in the learning-support teacher caseload. The learning-support teacher teaches a mainstream class programme in literacy and numeracy to pupils in first class. These practices should be reviewed immediately. The learning support policy should be reviewed to ensure that mainstream class teachers are differentiating their programmes and that provision in the school adheres to the Learning-Support Guidelines and to the Special Education Circular 02/05 to ensure that pupils with the greatest learning needs (<12th percentile) receive priority within the learning support caseload and receive the greatest supports.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
Should educational disadvantage present among pupils the principal addresses such issues in a discreet and caring manner.

5. Conclusion

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- This school enjoys the support and goodwill of the community which it serves.
- The staff members work conscientiously to maximise the potential of pupils and have successfully fostered a pleasant, inclusive and healthy educational environment.
- Pupils present as confident, friendly, well behaved and co-operative learners.
- The board of management supports the work of the school conscientiously.
- There is a commendable level of communication with parents, and parents in turn are enthusiastic in their support of the school.
- The school is well resourced, particularly in ICT.
- Good standards of teaching and learning are evident throughout the school.
- Significant efforts have been made to promote a strong culture of reading for pleasure among pupils.

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

- The board of management needs to take a more active role in the planning process and in sharing the management workload. The board should devise a strategic plan which would prioritise the developmental needs of the school. The board should also ensure that post-holders duties are managed in accordance with Circular 07/03.
- Moltar breis béime a chur ar chumarsáid i dtéagasc na Gaeilge. A greater emphasis on communication is recommended in the teaching of Irish.
- The learning support policy should be reviewed to ensure that mainstream class teachers are differentiating their programmes and that provision in the school adheres to the
Learning-Support Guidelines and to the Special Education Circular 02/05 to ensure that pupils with the greatest learning needs receive the greatest supports.

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.

Published, September 2010
Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

We are delighted that the report highlights the very good teaching and learning in our school.
We warmly welcome the recognition of the schools commitment to the nurturing of the pupils’
holistic development.
We further welcome the affirmation of the strong sense of co-operation amongst the school
community, which contributes to the positive, inclusive, welcoming climate in our school.

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 board will be working on the recommendations of the inspectors.