

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Gortahork National School,
Gortahork,
Co. Donegal**

Uimhir rolla: 16819T

Date of inspection: 19 September 2013



1. Introduction

Gortahork National School is a co-educational Gaeltacht school under the patronage of the Bishop of Raphoe. A significant decline in the number of pupils on roll has taken place in recent years. Their number has fallen from 100 in 2009 to 65 in 2013. A steady pattern of attendance by the majority of the pupils is not evident and the board of management is advised to continue to develop suitable strategies to promote and sustain regular attendance throughout the school year. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in the curriculum areas of Irish, English, Mathematics and Science. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the **main strengths** of the work of the school:

- The board of management is to be commended for the efforts it has made over a long number of years to provide suitable accommodation and resources for the school community.
- In the context of the primary importance of the Irish language in the life and work of this Gaeltacht school, it is acknowledged that its teachers are doing their best to sustain Irish as a teaching and spoken language therein.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- It is essential that school management provide the members of staff with the guidance and leadership that is required for the further development of educational provision in this school.
- The quality of whole school planning, teaching, learning and pupil achievement is weak overall and it is recommended that significant development should take place in these key areas.
- It is recommended that a culture of co-operation and peer support be developed among the members of staff in order to advance and implement school planning.
- It is recommended that, as a matter of urgency, a strategic plan be set out containing clear short-term and long-term targets to deal with the difficulties and the significant learning weaknesses that exist in the school and that action be taken accordingly.
- A whole school system of assessment should be put in place which focuses on the educational needs of each pupil.
- It is recommended to the board of management that it monitor the work of the school and the self-evaluation practices that are in use in it on a regular basis in order to ensure that the pupils make continuous progress in all sections of the school.

3. Quality of School Management

- The members of the board of management of the school have been elected in accordance with good practice. Meetings of the board are conducted in a professional manner and issues such as the employment of staff, the management of the school building and the safety of the pupils receive due attention. This year an extra classroom was added to the building and the accommodation was upgraded generally during the summer holidays. The chairperson of the board works diligently to ensure that the accommodation and the school's resources are fit for purpose. The board supports the promotion of the language, culture and ethos of the school.
- A large number of organisational and curriculum policies have yet to be developed by the school and it is recommended that the board take an active part in this planning process. It faces considerable challenges in relation to raising the standards of provision in significant areas of the curriculum. It is recommended that an action plan containing very clear targets be set out in order to tackle those areas which are in need of development. This plan should be drawn up as a matter of urgency, responsibilities should be assigned and action should ensue. It is also recommended that the board should monitor the work of the school on a regular basis as well as the self-evaluation practices that are in use in order to ensure that the pupils in all sections of the school make steady progress.
- There are three classroom teachers and one learning support teacher on the staff. The classes are divided evenly among the classroom teachers. At the time of the evaluation one substitute teacher was working in the school.
- Although the teaching principal cultivates a welcoming environment in the school and carries out the normal daily management duties, significant weaknesses are evident in his leadership with respect to planning, curriculum and school organisation. There is a need to formulate a very definite agreed vision for the particular context of this school and the principal teacher, in particular, has an important role in bringing this vision to fruition. At present, insufficient guidance is being given in order to raise the standards in the ordinary daily work of the school. It is essential that guidance be provided in order to develop a definite plan in partnership with the staff of the school. There is a need to cultivate a culture of co-operation, common understanding and joint action among the staff so as to advance the planning process in a structured manner.
- The duties of the vice-principal should be reviewed to ensure that they include responsibilities in the areas of curriculum, administration and supervision and that they respond to the current needs of the school. It is recommended to in-school management that the progress of the pupils should be monitored closely and regularly and reported to the board of management when necessary. Opportunities should be given to teachers to exchange classes from year to year.
- It is perceived that communications between the school and the pupils' homes is in need of development. Newsletters are issued frequently and it was reported that the parents support school activities from time to time. They are provided with information on the progress of their children at parent-teacher meetings which are organised once a year and by way of written reports that are provided. A parents' committee used to function in the school but has not done so for the past year. It is recommended to the board of management that it give every support that it can to parents in establishing a new committee in order to foster their participation as partners in the education of the pupils and in supporting the development of the school.
- In their responses to the questionnaires that were distributed to parents, a high number were of the view that the school frequently does not seek the opinions of parents in

regard to school matters and indicated that they had not been given information about its policy on relationships and sexuality education. A certain number of them were also not sure that there was a good atmosphere in the school or that it deals well with bullying. It is recommended that the school's anti-bullying policy be developed in accordance with Circular Letter 045/2013 and that parents be informed about its policy on relationships and sexuality education.

- During the evaluation the quality of the management of pupils was good but, based on the outcomes from of the questionnaires which were distributed to them, there is scope for further development in this area. A high number felt that they were not sure that the pupils behave themselves well in the classrooms. It is also evident from the results that a small number of pupils do not feel safe in the playground and that a high number of them are of the view that they do not use computers frequently. These specific issues are worthy of discussion in the school and various arrangements should be agreed and put in place to address them. School assemblies are convened and pupils are given responsibilities in order to cultivate their respect for their environment.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The quality of the school planning and self-evaluation processes in the school is deficient. A number of planning documents were provided but they bear little relationship to the work in this school and they do not provide it with sufficient guidance. It is recommended that the school plan be further developed on a whole school basis with clear targets set out for each class group that are based on assessment results. It is further recommended that teaching objectives, teaching methods and systems of assessment and self-evaluation be set out in the plan. It would be important to lay out target dates and monitoring systems in the plan as well. Priority should be given to the development of an action plan to meet the specific needs of the school in the areas of Irish and English literacy and of numeracy.
- The quality of classroom planning in the junior classes is good but there are significant weaknesses in planning in the other classes. Due to the fact that no learning targets have been set down for each class level on a whole school basis, a difficulty is created in relation to continuity in classroom planning and to learning support. The teachers should focus continuously on pupil achievement and the results of attainment tests should be used to identify learning targets and to focus the teaching practices and approaches on their specific needs, as required. It would also be worth adhering to a suitable timetable while teaching as is recommended in the curriculum.
- Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The quality of teaching, learning and the pupil achievement in Irish is weak overall. Bearing in mind that this school is situated in the heart of the Gaeltacht, it is clear that the ability of the majority of the pupils in the junior classes to speak the language is limited. The teachers use Irish fully while teaching Irish but the pupils are not achieving sufficiently well in the language particularly in the area of literacy across all class levels. Although oral language lessons based on themes are taught, insufficient attention is given to the development of vocabulary in a very structured way or to continuous assessment of what the pupils have learned. Notwithstanding the fact that some pupils comprehend the reading material well, a number of them have significant difficulties in reading the texts and in breaking down words phonologically. It is recommended

therefore that phonological awareness, reading and writing programmes be developed on a structured and continuous basis. There is a need to assess the pupils' progress on a very regular basis in order to measure their reading and writing ability and to guide the teaching process.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in English is poor. A strategic whole-school approach to increasing the literacy attainments of the pupils is required. Teachers' commitment to the development of oral language, reading and writing skills should be improved. It is advised that a programme be implemented in all classes which is supportive of the pupils' oral language skills. Teachers do not currently use assessment data to develop whole school literacy targets. The assessment of pupils' progress on an ongoing basis to measure their attainment in literacy and to plan future learning is a matter of priority.
- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in Mathematics is in need of development, particularly in the middle and senior classes. Although the standard reached by a small number of pupils in almost every class is very good in the areas of problem solving and in answering arithmetic questions orally, the standard reached by the majority of the pupils needs to be raised. It is recommended that a wider range of concrete materials be used to ensure that concepts are consolidated more fully. The curriculum should be used to clarify learning targets throughout the school. It is further recommended that the ability of every pupil be taken into consideration when short-term plans are being prepared so as to ensure that the work is adapted to the needs of pupils of all levels of ability.
- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in Science needs further development. Due attention is given to the development of the skills, working scientifically and designing and making, in the junior and middle classes. It would be worth extending this practice to all classes when teaching Science.
- Overall, the quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement is weak. The teachers should make use of methods that focus on the abilities and needs of the pupils in order to develop the potential of each one of them in a structured manner. In particular, suitable teaching practices should be developed to focus on pupils with particular learning needs. It is also recommended that the use of information and communication technology be promoted.
- The standard of assessment is weak in the school. Standardised testing in Irish, English and Mathematics is carried out but the results are not used to plan on a whole school basis or to support co-operative planning by the class and support teachers. It would be of benefit to extend the range of diagnostic tests that are used in the learning support room in order to identify pupils' learning difficulties at an early stage and to provide them with suitable learning programmes accordingly. It is recommended that files be kept in which the progress of each pupil and each class is recorded.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- The quality of the provision made in the school for pupils with learning needs is weak. The support service is based in the school for fifteen hours per week and is shared with another school in the area. More effective co-ordination of the support provision in the school is required. There is no policy or whole school plan for special education and it is not evident in planning that close links with the work of the class teachers are maintained in the development of teaching targets. Although individual teaching programmes have been organised, it is recommended that planning be outlined to support the work of the teachers in the mainstream classes. It is recommended that consideration be given to the use of in-class team teaching when developing literacy skills so that pupils do not always

have to leave the classroom to receive additional learning support. It is further recommended that learning support in English literacy be provided through the medium of English.

- The co-operative development of an early intervention and post-intervention plan on a whole school basis would be worthwhile. The provision of in-class support in Mathematics has been initiated but it would be important that clear teaching and learning targets are developed for this support.
- A special needs assistant has been appointed in the school and she is working gainfully in supporting a pupil with additional educational needs. It is recommended that a support plan be drawn up in partnership with the assistant based on the work that is to be carried out.
- The school participates in the Language Assistants Scheme that is funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It would be worth including the assistant's input in the plan for Irish so that definite language enrichment targets will be achieved with groups of pupils within the classroom.
- The school makes suitable provision for the various needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. A book rental scheme is operated in the school.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The board is disappointed that the report is as critical, negative and as rigorous as it is. The one day inspection in 2010 was positive and the recommendations that the Inspector made were implemented. According to the questionnaires, the majority of parents and pupils are happy with the school. It appeared to the Board that the Principal and teachers were making their best efforts always both inside and outside of the classroom. The Board was happy with the standardised tests results in 2011/12. There is a very good relationship and co-operation between the Board and the Principal. The past pupils of the school are progressing very well in their education at second and at third level. There are many events and a variety of cultural, sporting and recreational activities ongoing in the school. The community has a clear understanding that this is an All-Irish, Gaeltacht school that is struggling with many forces outside the school that has Irish and the Gaeltacht under pressure. It is a disappointment and surprise to us that the school is as defective as is outlined in the report.

The Board does admit that its main priority for a number of years was the site and the school building. They were troubled years because of the dissatisfaction and the unrest that resulted from the unsuitable building and the school environs, circumstances that did not foster a good learning atmosphere. The Board invested a lot of time and effort into a campaign to secure a new school, and when this failed, it concentrated on the restoration of the old building to make it safe, and enjoyable for the pupils. The board developed a new entrance; built a new classroom and refurbished the other classrooms. These goals have been achieved and the board has a firm intention to concentrate on the pupils' education from now on.

***The Board has a great desire to act on the recommendations of this report.**

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 had three long meetings in November 2013, along with a meeting with the school teaching staff, to discuss the provision of education in the school and to draw-up an action plan and to make monitoring arrangements.

The Board decided to review the Child Protection; Attendance and Relationships and Sexuality Education policies along with the Discipline policy without delay.

The whole school planning is ongoing:-

- A PDST facilitator is helping us to implement this. She met with the Principal in the school on 8.10.2013 and with the staff on 3.12.2013.
- A NEPS psychologist is advising and supporting the school staff. She met with the Principal and with the learning support teacher on the 12.11.13.
- An Education Welfare Officer is working with the staff in relation to attendance matters.

This is a translation of the school response submitted by the board of management.