WHOLE SCHOOL EVALUATION

This report has been written following a whole school evaluation of St. Joseph’s School, Boleybeg, Rahoon, Galway. 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 inspector held pre-evaluation meetings with the principal, the teachers, the school’s board of management and the parents. The evaluation was conducted over a number of days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. He interacted with pupils and teachers, examined pupils’ work, and interacted with the class teachers. He reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. He met with various staff groups, where appropriate. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector 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 – THE SCHOOL’S CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

St. Joseph’s, Boleybeg, Rahoon is a seven teacher Gaeltacht school. It is situated in Boleybeg, which is part of the parish of Béarna, at the eastern edge of Galway city. Currently there are 121 pupils in the school. The pupils come from the surrounding area, from Knocknacarra and Béarna. Pupil numbers will increase over the coming years due to the amount of houses being built in the area.

Boleybeg School was founded in 1891. There is a prefabricated four room building in the yard. The school will be applying for an extension or a new building soon. The school is clean outside and inside.

2. THE QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL

2.1 The Board of Management

The Catholic Bishop of Galway is the school’s patron. The board of management has approximately seven or eight meetings a year. All board meetings are minuted. The board discusses and ratifies all new policies. The board’s main priorities at present are the construction of new classrooms, or a new building, and the improvement of traffic conditions outside the school. The board is aware of its duties relating to the promotion of Irish in the school, and in the local area, in accordance with paragraph 9 of the Education Act (1998). To this end, however, it is recommended that, in future, the board endeavours to upgrade its skills in the Irish language so that more Irish may be used in the board’s meetings. It would be worth forming and implementing a plan as soon as possible to achieve this central aim.

2.2 In-school management

There is a principal, a deputy principal, and two teachers with special duties in the school. The principal carries out his work diligently and conscientiously. The principal is to be complimented for the work he does in improving the educational standards and facilities of the school. The principal also makes a genuine effort to promote the Irish language.

The staff of the school work well together. The work done by the teachers on the in-school management team contributes to the success of the school. Especially noteworthy is the work which the members of the in-school management carry out in relation to school planning. The roll books are kept in order, but the register should be updated when the need arises. A staff meeting is organised each term. In organising these meetings, the staff follows the guidelines
set out by the Department. All the teachers are given the opportunity to share their ideas at the meetings and to discuss various issues.

2.3 Management of resources
The strengths of the teachers are taken into account when they are appointed to the various classes each year. The work which the secretary, the special needs assistants and the cleaners do for the school is praiseworthy. The school has a duty to ensure that these employees continue to do their best to improve their knowledge of Irish. In this regard, it would be worth ensuring that all employees have fluent Irish when they are being recruited.

The board of management has bought educational resources for the various curricular areas. This is especially evident in Science and Physical Education. In the future many more Irish language resources should be made available. In this regard, it would be worth reviewing the school’s documentation and notices to ensure that they are available in Irish or bilingually. All the classrooms are organised and decorated in an attractive manner which encourages learning.

2.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community
There is a parents’ association in the school. This association is registered with the National Parents’ Council. A good relationship between the parents and the school is evident. Parents play a part in school life in many ways. The parents’ association is to be praised for the Irish classes it organises for parents of little fluency and for those who want to improve their Irish. It is suggested that the association draft an Irish language policy. This would provide a structure for the inclusion of parents’ input and opinions about Irish in the school’s language planning. At their meeting with the inspector prior to the evaluation, the parents stated that they were happy with the school and with their children’s achievement.

An oral report regarding their own child’s progress is given to the parents at the annual parent teacher meeting. It is recommended that the teachers try to use Irish as much as possible at these meetings. The parents receive a written report on their child’s progress at the end of every school year. It is recommended that Irish be prioritised in these reports: that is, that the reports should be written in Irish. Parents are always welcome to discuss any aspect of the school [with the teachers]. A newsletter is published for parents to let them know about school achievements. Irish is used in the newsletters but they should be in Irish or bilingual from beginning to end from now on.

2.5 Management of pupils
The pupils of Boleybeg School well behaved. They have respect for the teachers and for each other. They welcome visitors. The pupils are interested in learning and therefore they do their work to the best of their ability. Irish is not the main home language for the majority of the pupils. It is recommended now to compose a specific development plan to improve the pupils’ ability to speak Irish.

3. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

3.1 School planning process and implementation
Boleybeg School has put together a school plan. The staff receives invaluable support from in-service cuiditheoirí. This support helps the school planning process. The school plan is openly available to parents. The policies are available in Irish as they ought and in English for parents with little Irish.
There is a mission statement in the school plan and there are plans for almost every curricular area. It is recommended now to draft and implement a plan for Drama. Policies have been developed on appropriate administrative matters, for example a health and safety statement, an equality statement and an enrolment policy. It is recommended that it is outlined at the beginning of every policy and curricular plan that this is a Gaeltacht school. It would be worth explaining here also the implications regarding the school’s Gaeltacht status and the responsibilities that this puts on the school to promote Irish in every aspect of school life.

Evidence was produced, according to Circular 0061/2006 from the Department of Education and Science that the board of management has formally accepted the *Guidelines and the Approach on the Protection of Children* (The Department of Education and Science, May 2001). Evidence was also procured that the attention of the board of management, the staff and the parents was drawn to the procedures for all staff members (including new members); and that management has ensured that all staff understands the procedures which are to be followed. A nominated liaison representative has been appointed and according to the requirements of the guidelines.

3.2 Classroom Planning

Nearly every teacher in Boleybeg School sets out a long term plan, a short term plan and an account of the work which has been completed. These schemes are appropriate to the work of the school. It is recommended that all teachers have their schemes of work available in the classroom at all times to ensure that effective planning is implemented throughout the school. The school and the individual teachers stick to a suitable timetable.

Individual educational plans are developed, in conjunction with class teachers and parents, for pupils receiving learning support or for those with special education needs. These plans are revised twice a year. Accounts of this work are kept in the learning support rooms, but it is recommended that these accounts be made clearer. There are copies of the individual educational plans for the appropriate pupils available in the class teacher’s folder also.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

4.1 Overview of the quality of teaching and learning

The education provided in Boleybeg School is of a good standard. Many of the pupils achieve a very high standard in English especially. Effective teaching methods are used in the majority of classes in the school. The school is recommended to give priority to Irish as the language of communication and teaching. Central to this, would be to lay an even greater emphasis on teaching through Irish in all of the curricular areas.

4.2 Language

*Irish*

This school is in a Gaeltacht area. Because of this, the school has a special duty to develop and foster the teaching and learning of Irish, and teaching and learning through Irish. The teachers accept this responsibility and credit is due to them for the effort they make to implement the objectives of this responsibility. It would be expected, however, that even higher standards should be attained in Irish. This work, therefore, should be expanded much more. As a very important part of this, Irish should be used much more often in the various curricular activities.

The fostering of listening and comprehension skills is emphasised in the junior classes. Effort is made to awaken the pupils’ interest in the language and they are encouraged to communicate with their fellow pupils at an early stage. To expand this work more effectively up through the school, it is recommended that much more emphasis be placed on this work. It would be worthwhile to further encourage the willingness of parents and the commitment of
the whole staff in this effort. It will be necessary from now on to place more emphasis on the fostering of pupils’ competence in communication, for example through drama, debates and presentations.

Reading and writing skills are fostered reasonably effectively. The pupils’ written work in the various aspects are on display in the classes and in public areas. However, the print-rich environment in Irish should be increased, so that it is clear in every way to visitors and to the whole school community that it is a Gaeltacht school.

The class libraries could play a special part in this work. There are Irish books available in each class library in the school. However, many more Irish books could still be provided for each class. It is recommended that a plan be laid out to ensure that these books are used and that this would help to improve and enrich the pupils' ability in Irish.

**English**

The majority of pupils in Boleybeg School attain very impressive standards in English. Oral language development is appropriately emphasised. Most of the pupils can speak about themselves, their interests and a variety of other topics articulately. The recitation of rhymes and poems and the writing of poetry, especially in the junior classes, are commendable.

There is a print-rich environment in most of the classrooms. Emphasis is placed on the development of phonological awareness in the junior classes, as part of the foundation of basic reading skills. Even more emphasis should now be placed on developing reading skills and on fostering a love of reading throughout the school. This should help to maintain and advance still further the high standard of reading in the school. In choosing the novels for use in class, care should be taken to ensure that both the content and the level of reading difficulty are appropriate for the age and ability of the pupils.

Class libraries are reasonably well stocked and well presented overall. It would be worthwhile, however, to invest more extensively in books to provide a continuous and up-to-date supply of books for readers at all levels of age and ability. A system of shared and independent reading should be introduced throughout the school to ensure that all pupils read a certain number of books each year.

The standard of English writing throughout the school is high. There are many very good examples of pupils’ writing in a variety of genres on display in almost every class. The writing process is appropriately emphasised and written work is carefully edited before being displayed in class. Copybooks and workbooks contain much commendable work in functional and creative writing. This work is presented clearly and neatly in most classes.

**4.3 Mathematics**

The pupils attain a good standard in Mathematics. However, even higher standards across the school would be expected. Therefore, it is recommended that even more emphasis be placed on the teaching of Mathematics in almost every class. Also, there should be emphasis placed on the teaching of Mathematics through Irish. It is recommended that a strategy be set out to achieve this goal. It would be worth beginning with the textbooks for Mathematics. It is recommended that the main textbooks being used in the school should be changed to the Irish versions from the beginning of next year.

Due attention is paid to basic concepts in the infant classes and this is developed in the other classes. The majority of pupils know mathematical terms in English. It is recommended that, from now on, mathematical terms be taught in Irish also. It would be worthwhile to place greater emphasis on solving mathematical problems and especially on number facts (tables). Most pupils record their work neatly and clearly. The teachers of nearly all the classes check this work systematically.
There is a broad range of mathematical resources in the school. Effective use is made of these resources during teaching in nearly all the classes. Mathematics is noticeable in the environment with Mathematics posters and Mathematics corners in the classes. It is recommended that this work be further developed. It will also be necessary to provide more posters and equipment in Irish, or at least bilingually, be used in future.

4.4 Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE)

History
An appropriate emphasis is placed on History in this school. The pupils both enjoy and benefit from the History lessons and activities. The majority of pupils understand the events and occasions studied. Pupils’ local knowledge which is evident throughout the school does them credit. There are timelines in many of the classrooms which record important historical dates. In the junior classes, commendable work is being carried out on the strand Myself and my family.

Geography
The standards of teaching and learning in Geography are good. The emphasis placed on the strand Human environments is commendable throughout the school. The majority of pupils have reasonably accurate knowledge about the surrounding area, Ireland, and other countries of the world. There are maps displayed in every class and there are globes to be seen in some of the classes also. It is recommended that these resources should be used even more often during the teaching of Geography and in the other curricular areas. The pupils in some of the classes do noteworthy projects on geographical topics. This work is displayed in an attractively inspirational way on the walls or in the class libraries.

Science
The approach and the achievement of the school in Science are praiseworthy. There is an emphasis on fostering the pupils’ skills in working scientifically. The effect and value of the pupils’ good achievement is noticeable during science lessons. There is constant use made of equipment, technology and field work. Due emphasis is placed on the strand Living Things at every level in the school. There are interesting science tables to be seen in each class. The school has received three Green Flags in the last number of years. The staff members and pupils who participate in this work are to be commended. The school takes an advantageous part in the programme Discover Primary Science also.

4.5 Arts Education

Visual Arts
The work done on Visual Arts throughout the school is to be praised. The classrooms and the corridors are attractively decorated with samples of the pupils’ art work. The six strands in the curriculum are competently covered and there is a balance between two-dimensional and three-dimensional work. The correct emphasis is also placed on looking at art and responding to it.

Music
A high standard is attained in Music throughout the school. The pupils play the tin whistle in all the classes sweetly and musically. Due attention is paid to Song singing and the pupils are able to sing a broad range of songs in Irish and English in all classes. There is a school choir which sings on special occasions, for example for First Communion. Effective practice is carried out on rhythm, intervals and Composing also. The work which is done on listening to music and responding to it in some of the classes is praiseworthy. It is clear in those lessons that a love for Music is aroused in the pupils.
**Drama**

Effective use has been made of Drama in some of the classes to explore emotions, understanding and interesting themes. A whole school plan for Drama should now be set out and fully implemented. The school has a special opportunity to use the Drama programme to promote Irish in an interesting way for pupils. Already, this work has begun in some of the classes. It would be worthwhile expanding this practice throughout the school.

**4.6 Physical Education**

Every effort is made in this school to ensure that all pupils get personal enjoyment from Physical Education. There is a motion development programme laid out for every class based on the various strands in the curriculum. The work in the strands *Dance* and *Games* in particular deserves a mention. Emphasis is placed on the developmental needs [of pupils].

There is a playing field at the back of the school which is available for Physical Education lessons and the school yard is set up for various games. However the general purposes room has been used as a classroom in recent years. Therefore the school is in difficulty in wet weather. The school participates in Cumann na mBunscol. The school does well in this competition and in various local and regional sports also.

**4.7 Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)**

A co-ordinated approach is practiced in SPHE with a great variety of activities. There is a range of predesigned programmes being used in the school. Also, there are personal opportunities available to pupils to investigate interesting themes through the various strands of the curriculum. Self responsibility and caring skills are fostered in an effective way. Effective work is done, especially in the lessons where circle time is used.

**4.8 Assessment**

The school uses the standardised Drumcondra tests in English and Mathematics once a year. The Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST) is given to the infants once a year. This assessment helps early recognition of learning difficulties. The results of these tests are kept in central locations in the school and individual teachers also keep the results which relate to their own classes. Therefore the pupils' results can be compared with those of pupils throughout the country. The pupils who have special educational needs are also identified. Diagnostic tests are also used to identify specific needs of pupils.

Files and collections of work of samples of pupils' work in various areas of the curriculum are kept in most classes. Use is also made of teacher-designed tests and of teacher observation in all classes to assess pupils' progress.

**5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS**

**5.1 Pupils with special educational needs**

The school has developed a learning support and resource policy. This policy helps to implement a reasonably effective service for pupils with learning difficulties and other needs. Parental permission is sought before commencement of this extra teaching and a commendable effort is made to include parental input in every way. The parents take part in the composition of the individual education plans. However, to further improve this process, it is recommended that copies of the plans be given to parents from now on.

The learning support rooms and the resource rooms are decorated in an stimulating way with educational posters. There are examples of the pupils’ work on display also. Learning support is made available to every pupil who needs it, either in these rooms or within the mainstream classroom.
5.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups
Pupils receive an effective education in this school as a whole and every pupil is included in school life. The school is well known for the work done on behalf of pupils with special needs here. The school community always makes every effort for pupils from different backgrounds or those with various difficulties.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a positive, diligent atmosphere in Boleybeg School.
- The board of management is to be commended for the support it gives the school.
- The members of the teaching staff of the school work well together.
- The teachers always welcome pupils with special needs.
- The achievement of the pupils across the curriculum is good. The achievement of the pupils in some curricular areas is very impressive.
- A high standard is attained in English throughout the school.
- The quality of work in SESE is to be praised, especially the work on local studies in History and Geography and the work on environmental matters in Science.
- Praiseworthy, effective work done in Music.
- There is a high standard noticeable in Physical Education.
- The school is clean outside and inside.

As a way of building on these strengths and to focus on areas for development the following recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that even more emphasis be placed on Irish, to promote and develop the school's Gaeltacht status in every aspect of school life. Central to this, would be the implementation of a new approach in the school to maintain and encourage teaching through the medium of Irish.
- It would be worthwhile putting together a process to implement Irish as the medium of instruction. This should be done in consultation with the parents' association to ensure their support. It is recommended also that Irish text books be used in the school from now on.
- It is recommended that the board of management come up with a plan to upgrade its members' Irish language skills. The meetings of the board could then be held mainly in Irish.
- More emphasis could be placed on the teaching of Mathematics. Also, both the Irish language and Irish terminology should be used in the teaching of Mathematics.

Post-evaluation meetings were organised with staff and with the board of management at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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