Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire
Cashel, Kindrum, Co. Donegal
Roll number: 18120J

Date of inspection: 24 November 2010
1. Introduction

Scoil Mhuire is a co-educational, Gaeltacht primary school with four teachers and 72 pupils on rolls. It is a Catholic school under the patronage of the Bishop of Raphoe. The pupils’ attendance is very good. Although this is a Gaeltacht school, a number of pupils attend from outside the Gaeltacht and from families whose home language is English. The majority of the pupils attend an Irish nursery which is situated in the area before attending the school. Most pupils transfer to all-English post-primary schools in Milford.

The school participates in the Language Assistants Scheme which is funded by the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs and in the in the Modern Languages in Primary Schools, an initiative of the Department of Education and Skills. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in 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:

- This school has a strong Irish language tradition, wherein interest in and respect for Irish culture and language are being stimulated effectively by the principal and the entire staff. The commitment of the teachers in this regard is commended.
- The chairperson of the board gives very good support to the administration of the school and the members of the board and the teachers work well together for the good of the school.
- The principal provides effective leadership to all partners and she works energetically and very professionally.
- The diligence and the loyalty of the teachers in relation to their work and the culture of co-operation and mutual support that is apparent among all the school staff are commended.
- There is a very pleasant atmosphere evident in the school. The pupils display respect for one another, great interest in the learning and dedication to their work.
- There is a very active parents’ association in the school which fully supports the board and staff.

The following main recommendations are made:

- It would be worthwhile to make use of the assessment system, Comharthai Cumais na Gaeilge (Indicators of Competency in Irish), to monitor the progress of the pupils in Irish.
- It is recommended that the pupils’ problem-solving skills are developed further in Mathematics.
- It is recommended that planning is undertaken on a structured basis for the specific language phrases that the pupils need to acquire the concepts and the related skills in Mathematics and Science.
- It would be worthwhile to compile an e-learning plan and to increase the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning.
3. Quality of School Management

- The board plays a very active part in the management of the school and it functions effectively according to Departmental guidelines. Specific tasks are allocated to individual board members and they give of their time very generously. Although the board is aware of its responsibilities in relation to the promotion of Irish according to Paragraph 9 of the 1998 Education Act, it is recommended that it reviews the ways in which it could further develop the culture and ethos of this Gaeltacht school. It is also recommended that training is sought from the Catholic Primary School Management Association to support new board members with their duties.

- The principal fulfils her curricular and administrative leadership duties energetically and very professionally. The principal has a central role in promoting Irish as the main language of communication in the school and she has a commendable vision for developing the school into a strong Gaeltacht school. The deputy principal functions very capably in her curricular, administrative and pastoral responsibilities which address the needs of the school. She gives great support and co-operation to the principal.

- There is very good management of the school’s human and material resources. The teachers have created a comfortable learning atmosphere in the classrooms. The school environment is child-friendly and the school’s yard and garden are commended. A culture of co-operation and hard work is discernible among the entire staff. Co-operative teaching and in-class support are progressing effectively. A part-time secretary gives worthwhile support in the daily administration and operation of the school.

- A very active parents’ association fully supports the board and the staff. Parents’ representatives from the board praised the openness and the new practices/procedures established by the principal for communicating with parents. It would be worthwhile now to develop a website, in order to strengthen this communication further and to inform the parents about all school policies.

- A co-operative and hard-working atmosphere is evident/noted among the pupils and the teachers, in the classrooms and in the whole-school environment. A school assembly is organised every week and prizes such as Gaeilgeoirí na Seachtaine (Irish Speakers of the Week) are presented to pupils in the various classes. In order to develop this good practice further, it is recommended that there should be greater input from the pupils themselves. According to parent and pupil questionnaires, a high number of parents considered that discipline is good in the school and that the school environment is safe for the pupils. A high number of the pupils felt that they get on well with other pupils in the school, that the teachers explain things clearly in lessons and that this is a good school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- The quality of the administrative aspects of whole-school planning is good. An action plan has been prepared to identify the school’s priorities and to give direction to/guide the review of policies. The planning available in the four subjects for evaluation is suitably based on the principles of the curriculum. There is need, however, for each curricular plan to give clarity to the teachers in relation to the learning targets and skills for development at each class level. Planning is also required on a structured basis for the specific language phrases that the pupils need to acquire the concepts and the related skills in Mathematics and Science.
• The quality of individual teacher planning is good in general. It is recommended that the template for short-term planning be reviewed, in order that it would have more information with regard to teaching methods, learning activities and assessment in the multi-class context. The teachers maintain monthly records of the pupils’ progress and the principal keeps these records in a central location. This good practice is commended.

• School authorities provided evidence that, in compliance with Primary Circular 0061/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Primary Schools. Evidence was provided to show 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.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

• The teaching and learning of Irish in the school is of a high standard. Excellent examples of the teaching and learning of spoken Irish were observed at various class levels. The pupils in all classes have good fluency and a good number of them achieve a high level of understanding. A very good foundation is laid for reading in the early years, by means of affording pupils opportunities to read from the Séideán Sí books. The pupils in the middle and higher classes read with fluency and very good accuracy and they answer comprehension questions well. The pupils practise formal writing regularly and very good emphasis is placed on sentence construction in the lower and middle classes. It would be worthwhile developing this work further by giving the pupils regular opportunities to write independently in a wide range of genres.

• The overall quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in English is very good. Whole-school literacy scores show good improvement in pupils’ reading skills. The teachers are commended for their work in raising standards of reading aided by the use of a structured phonological programme and effectively implemented comprehension programmes. Further use of differentiated sets of class novels is recommended in the middle and senior classes. The pupils’ writing skills are effectively nurtured in the junior classes and the standard of the pupils’ handwriting in the middle classes in particular is commendable. The standard of creative writing in the senior classes is praiseworthy.

• The school participates in the Modern Languages in Primary Schools’ initiative and German classes are provided for sixth class for an hour and a half each week. The pupils are active in the learning and they are making satisfactory progress in the language; very good emphasis is placed on appropriate pronunciation, on songs, on language games and on the teaching of suitable themes. The pupils’ handbooks are commended. It is now recommended that fifth class should participate in the project according to Departmental guidelines.

• The standard of teaching and learning in Mathematics is good. The teachers present the learning material to the pupils in a stimulating manner and they make good use of concrete materials and of active teaching methods. It would be worthwhile to develop the vocabulary of Mathematics from the lower classes upwards, in order to provide opportunities for the pupils to internalise the terminology of Mathematics. Irish language textbooks should be used for Mathematics in the senior classes, as is the practice in the
junior and middle classes. It is evident from standardised test results that there is progress to be noted in the pupils’ competency in Mathematics.

- In Science, the pupils develop scientific concepts satisfactorily. The work carried out in the school garden and on re-cycling is commended. In order to further enhance the standard of learning in Science, it would be worthwhile to focus on developing the pupils’ scientific skills further, through the organisation of group work and suitable experiments on a regular basis. Opportunities should be provided for pupils to participate in various scientific projects. It is recommended, also, that there should be a particular focus on the terminology that is required by the pupils in the learning of Science.

- It is clear that there is a committed team of teachers in this school who are serious about their work and that the quality of the teaching, of the learning and of the pupils’ attainment is good. The teachers employ creative teaching methods and the full participation of pupils is supported in the teaching and learning. The results of the standardised assessments should be used to better effect, as a foundation for the organisation of group work in English and Mathematics and to differentiate tasks according to the different needs of the pupils in the multi-class context. The use of information and communication technology resources in teaching and learning has scope for development throughout the school.

- A comprehensive assessment system is in place which includes an intense study of the pupils’ progress in English reading and Mathematics. It is now recommended that the pupils’ progress in Irish is measured, according to the Comhartháí Cumais sa Ghaeilge (Indicators of Competency in Irish) assessment system. Parents are kept informed of their children’s progress in literacy and numeracy and in other areas of the curriculum. Reports are sent home at the end of each school year, as appropriate. In the questionnaires which were distributed during the evaluation, a high number of parents considered that the teaching and learning was good in the school and the pupils were of the opinion that they were achieving satisfactorily in learning, especially in reading.

6. Quality of Supports for Pupils

- Provision for pupils with learning difficulties is of a high standard. The specific learning needs of the pupils are outlined/ categorised and appropriate support in literacy and numeracy, based on those needs, is organised. The pupils’ progress is recorded on a regular basis. In-class teaching is conducted on a structured basis, as need requires. It is recommended that additional time be given to pupils with learning difficulties in numeracy. It would be worthwhile to devise an early intervention strategy for Mathematics, so that some periods of targeted support are given to pupils in the infant classes.

- The language assistant gives support to certain pupils in language acquisition and enrichment under the Language Assistants Scheme. As the language assistant was absent during the evaluation, this provision was not evaluated.

- The school participates in a wide range of extracurricular activities, for example, musical activities, Food Dudes, the Green-Schools programme, Irish dancing, the Christmas shoe box appeal, quizzes, the Skipathon and football. Numerous worthwhile projects have been established as co-curricular activities, for example, Grandparents’ Day.
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
This is a translation of the School Response that was submitted in Irish

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The board of management and the school staff of Scoil Mhuire would like to thank the inspector for the report on the work of our school, for the professional way that that evaluation was carried out and for the moral boost that this report gave to the staff and to the wider school community.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- From the school year 2011-2012 onwards, the assessment system “Comharthai Cumais na Gaeilge” will be used to assess the pupils’ progress in Irish. This assessment will be carried out in May each year.
- More emphasis will be placed on the skills that are needed in problem solving in Mathematics at each class level and the children will have opportunities to solve problems regularly to reinforce these skills.
- The school staff will develop an action plan in Mathematics and in Science with regard to specific language phrases in these subjects. This planning will be based on the needs of the pupils at each class level.
- Since the evaluation was carried out, the infrastructure is in place in each classroom for the internet. Attendance at an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) course has been organised for the first term to plan long term for the wider use of ICT in every classroom.