

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch
Ballymun, Co.Dublin
Uimhir rolla: 19430G**

Date of inspection: 23 October 2009



WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was undertaken in October 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in Irish, Mathematics and Geography. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch is a Catholic school, under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin. The school is situated on the main Ballymun Road and it serves boys and girls from the area. The school building was erected in 1983. The school participates in the Department’s DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme.

The following table provides an overview of the enrolment and staffing in the school at the time of the evaluation:

	Number
Pupils enrolled in the school	196
Mainstream classes in the school	9
Teachers on the school staff	13
Mainstream class teachers	9
Teachers working in support roles	3
Special needs assistants	1

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch is an all-Irish primary school. The school was founded in 1973. The aim of the school is to provide an all-Irish education for the pupils so that they “*can experience their language and culture and so that they will be good citizens in the future, prepared for the life that is before them*”. It is obvious that the school achieves this aim very effectively.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management is properly constituted and the board gives steadfast support to the principal and the staff of the school. Board meetings are convened once a month, when the principal’s report and that of the treasurer are presented. The board members fulfil the duties that are assigned to them effectively. The chairperson of the board has regular contact with the principal and she visits the school at least once a week. It is obvious that there is a very good relationship between the board members and the school staff. Members of the parents’ association are on the board of management and communication and co-operation between the two committees are facilitated. The priority of the school community is that the school “*is recognised as an attractive place for young and old*”.

1.3 In-school management

There are four teachers on the in-school management team: the principal, the deputy principal, the assistant principal and a teacher with a post of responsibility. The principal directs the work of the school capably and he displays management skills that are open and understanding. He

creates a positive atmosphere in the school. He has a vision for education and he affirms the efforts of the staff to progress the learning process. He encourages every member of the school community to participate in the life of the school and he empowers them by fostering a democratic decision-making system. Duties are assigned to each member of the in-school management team, regarding the curriculum, school organisation and pastoral matters. The members give feedback to the staff at staff meetings on the events they organise. Meetings of the in-school management team are held once a month to discuss the work and policies of the school. School chronicles are kept accurately and there are effective systems in place in the school to make contact with the parents.

1.4 Management of resources

There are eight permanent classrooms, albeit nine classes, in the school. At present there are two temporary classrooms in use, one is in use as a classroom and the other as a parents' room. A general purpose room is also in use as a computer room. There is no library room in the school and the secretary, who does not have an office, works in a corner of the staffroom. The principal has a small, narrow room for an office. The board of management has plans to build an extension to the building and to provide additional rooms for learning support, offices for the principal and the secretary and a staffroom suitable for the size of staff.

There are appropriate arrangements in place for the cleaning and the upkeep of the school and its grounds. A part-time secretary gives great assistance in the daily functioning of the school. All members of the teaching staff and of the ancillary staff are commended on their efforts to keep the school clean and safe for the school communities.

There are ample resources available to the pupils in the school. There are plenty of suitable aids available for use in Irish, mathematics and geography. There is a good supply of varied books in the classroom libraries. The teachers produce additional resources for use in lessons across the range of the curriculum. Good use is made of resources such as maps, photographs, pictures and information and communication technology in lessons throughout the school.

1.5 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Members of the school community report on how welcoming the principal and the entire staff are. They praise the openness of the school. The parents have a central part in the life of the school. Meetings with the parents are arranged regularly and their views are welcomed and their participation in school activities is cultivated. The parents give great support to the work of the school in relation to curricular matters. They come into the school on a regular basis and they have a central role in its functioning as regards finance, safety and the promotion of the ethos and customs of the school, especially in relation to language and culture. Regular contact is made with the parents and they are kept informed of the progress of pupils through regular meetings with teachers and by means of written reports which the school supplies each year. The staff is commended on the quality of the school's website and the frequency with which they add to its content in order to apprise the school community of school events.

1.6 Management of pupils

There is very effective management of the pupils in the school. Work habits have been instilled in them and respect is discernible between the teachers and pupils and between the pupils themselves. The pupils are affirmed positively on a regular basis and a comfortable learning atmosphere has been created by the teachers in the classrooms. Attention is paid to the health and safety of the pupils and the full participation of the pupils in every aspect of the life of the school is nurtured. The good behaviour of the pupils enhances the effectiveness of the learning in the classrooms. The code of behaviour is implemented in a fair and balanced manner. Good habits of

behaviour are cultivated among the pupils and there is a commendable system in place to manage bad behaviour.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The quality of whole-school planning is of a high standard. There is evidence of good co-operation between the board of management, the staff and the parents in the planning process. Moreover the comprehensive planning system which has been established by the school regarding administrative and curricular matters is praised. The implementation of the school plan is monitored and reviewed regularly during staff meetings. The needs of the school are focused on in the policies and clear guidance is given to teachers to ensure that there is progression in the learning from class to class. Time is devoted at every board and staff meeting to reviewing and amending various policies. Although there is evidence in the minutes that the school policies have been ratified by the board, every policy should be signed and dated by the chairperson of the board of management and each one should have a target review date.

The quality of planning that is done by all teachers is good. The teachers display a good understanding of the basic principles of the curriculum and they organise long-term and short-term schemes under the headings of the strands and strand units of the curriculum. The influence of the curriculum documents and of the school plan is apparent in the planning, particularly in the long-term planning. It is recommended that the template for short-term planning be reviewed, in order that it would contain more information relating to teaching methodologies, learning activities and assessment. The teachers prepare a wide range of stimulating resources to support the teaching and learning and they create an attractive learning environment in the classrooms. The teachers maintain monthly records on the progress of the pupils which are retained in a central location by the principal.

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

Irish

It is clear that every member of the teaching staff is well disposed towards Irish and they cultivate good will for the language throughout the school. Under the direction of the principal's leadership, a positive Irish atmosphere is nurtured in the school's environs. During the evaluation, it was obvious that systematic use is made of Irish as a language of communication in the school and yard and that the pupils are enticed to use the language in different settings. The

board of management and the parents strongly support the staff and Irish lessons are arranged for the parents on a regular basis.

The teachers organise a wide range of suitable exercises across all strands of the curriculum. Clarity of purpose and good structure are in evidence in the Irish lessons. Suitable attention is devoted to the development of the pupils' listening, oral, reading and writing skills. Good use is made of language games, storytelling, drama and a variety of resources to foster the participation of the pupils in the learning activities that are made available for them. The lessons are based on the pupils' areas of interest and emphasis is placed on the attractive use of the language in every class.

In the infants' classes, the teachers devise suitable exercises to give the pupils opportunities to use Irish in a variety of situation and to become accustomed to the language. Subsequently, first class is divided in two halves every year to facilitate a strong input at this class level and to enhance the pupils' ability. The effectiveness of this practice is evidenced from second class onwards, particularly in the pupils' oral capabilities.

In every class, exercises are conducted to improve the pupils' language accuracy. Use is made of class teaching, group teaching, pair work and individual work to afford pupils opportunities to speak the language as the ordinary language of live communication. The pupils question one another, under the direction of the teacher, and helpful activities are organised to further their ability to speak continuously on various themes. The pupils learn rhymes, poems, and Irish songs at every level and they can recite them with understanding and enjoyment. According as the pupils advance through the school, their ability to converse is enhanced by the systematic use of regular exercises and suitable learning activities.

There is ample print on display in the environment and reading is taught progressively through the school. A wide range of texts is available and additional attractive resources provided by the teachers to support the teaching of reading. The teachers employ suitable teaching methods and the resources to promote the participation of the pupils. Included among the resources are charts, labels, pictures, leaflets and library books. Four interactive whiteboards are in the school and the teachers use them effectively, as well as software presentations, to develop the reading abilities of the pupils. The pupils read extracts with understanding at suitable levels through the school and they indicate that they can follow written directions to perform tasks and to solve problems.

The public library which is situated beside the school is used to source books. There is a good stock of books which are suitable for all age levels in the school library also. The teachers use the large-format books in a stimulating manner with the infants' classes and novels are employed effectively in the middle and senior classes.

The pupils write functionally and creatively at suitable levels throughout the school. It is obvious that they are accustomed to writing in various genres. They compose poetry, write simple news and they summarise stories. The teachers place commendable emphasis on the writing process and the pupils are given opportunities to develop editing skills by means of drafting and re-drafting their work. Some of the pupils' work is displayed in the classrooms and along the corridors but more emphasis could be placed on putting the varied work of the pupils across the range of the curriculum on display in every classroom on a regular basis.

3.2 Mathematics

The constructivist approach is employed in Mathematics and the pupils have lots of experience in handling concrete materials during the mathematics lessons in every class in the school. The

teachers ensure that there is a balance between mental, practical and written work in mathematics lessons. They create a mathematical environment in every classroom, where mathematical charts and posters that are relevant to the theme being covered, are on display. Effective use is made of a range of teaching methods. The use that is made of concrete materials and visual aids in every class is commended. The emphasis on the language of Mathematics and on consistency regarding the teaching of Mathematics throughout the school is commended.

The majority of pupils display good understanding of mathematical concepts. The class teachers differentiate tasks for pupils with learning needs in Mathematics. The teachers design tasks and tests for their classes and they use standardised tests also. Careful monitoring of the pupils' work and systematic analysis of their achievements in Mathematics are carried out. Perceptive use is made of the results of that assessment to concentrate on the common problems that pupils have and to create remedial programmes for pupils with additional learning needs in Mathematics.

3.3 Geography

The whole-school plan for Geography was developed by means of a co-operative process in which the staff, the facilitator and the board participated. The staff tested the plan for a year, they analysed the experience they had gained and revised the plan accordingly. An appropriate amount of time is allocated to the teaching of Geography in every class and the plan is in keeping with the design of the curriculum. It is ensured that each curricular strand is covered. A programme is arranged for every class level and a box of resources has been supplied to every class. In the plan the need for every child to examine and understand the world all around them is recognised and a commendable emphasis is placed on developing geographical skills as well as acquiring knowledge. It is obvious that the plan is devised to serve the needs of the school and there is ample evidence available of the local environment being used as a teaching resource.

One of the priorities that the staff had, when the plan was being devised, was how Geography should be integrated with other subjects. Arising from this, the plan gives direction to the teachers on thematic teaching within Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) and across the curriculum. It is clear from the teachers' long-term schemes that planning has been done to employ the use of a wide range of methodologies and reference is made to the use of a variety of resources. In the teaching, it is observed that there is balance between the delivery of the content and the development of geographical skills. Stimulating resources are used to advantage during the lessons in all classes to cultivate the interest of the pupils and, in some classes, it is noticed that commendable innovative use is being made of information and communication technology.

The local environment as well as other contrasting environments are investigated and ample resources have been supplied by the teachers in order to provide opportunities for pupils to develop their research capabilities. The use of the terminology of Geography is stressed in every class, as is ability of the pupils to talk about what they have learnt. The teachers employ a range of assessment methods in Geography. Continuous assessment is done on the work of the pupils during lessons, samples of work are kept in files and the teachers give helpful feedback on the pupils' learning. In the lower classes, the pupils indicate an awareness of place and they have knowledge of natural features in the local environment. The pupils display their understanding of space and place by the use of appropriate terms and they are able to identify various places on globes and maps. Their knowledge is developed and extended in the middle classes and in the higher classes. The pupils are knowledgeable about counties, large towns and aspects of the physical environment of Ireland.

The school participates in the Green Schools' project and the pupils are able to talk confidently about their participation and about the activities they perform under the umbrella of the World

Action Plan. The practical work is suited to the ages of the pupils and they are proud of their work in the school garden. Field trips are organised regularly. The pupils go on field trips to interesting sites, including the National Botanic Gardens, on a regular basis. Recently the school participated in a Léargas project, where the school was affiliated with schools in Belfast and Wales. The pupils in the higher classes visited the other schools and they learnt about the lives of the pupils in those schools.

3.4 Assessment

There are various assessment methods in use in the school in order to garner information on the pupils' progress across the curriculum, including questioning, teacher observation, checklists, folders with samples of the pupils' work and teacher-devised assignments and tests. As well as these methods, standardised tests are employed to assess reading and mathematical standards. Assessment is used to assess the pupils' progress in learning, to identify pupils with special education needs and to impart information to parents.

Through analysing the results of tests and through regular observation of the pupils' work, the teachers see the curricular aspects that need to be revised or the concepts that should be reinforced. Comprehensive records of the results of assessment are retained for an appropriate period of time. In the whole-school plan for Geography, it is shown that decisions have been made and particulars outlined regarding the manner in which assessment, documentation and reporting of the children's progress will be conducted.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

Effective provision is made for pupils who have difficulties in literacy and numeracy. Three teachers are engaged in special education in the school, two language support teachers and one teacher providing support in Mathematics. The support teaching is based on the staged approach. Clear learning objectives are set out in individual work plans for particular pupils and the progress of the learning is recorded regularly. Contact and regular informal discussions are held between the support teachers and the mainstream teachers regarding the progress of pupils with special education needs. The learning targets of the pupils are reviewed on a regular basis. The parents are kept informed regarding the progress of the pupils and ways in which additional help may be given to them at home. The openness and high level of communication, which are observed between the support team and the teachers in the mainstream classes and between the staff and the parents, are commended.

4.2 Other supports for pupils: disadvantaged, minority and other groups

The school participates in a wide range of projects that provide additional supports for disadvantaged pupils in particular. The staff of the school co-operates with facilitators of the DEIS scheme to advance literacy and numeracy. At present, the review and development of the DEIS plan are priorities for the staff of the school. In this regard, courses relating to *First Steps* and *Maths Recovery* are being arranged for the staff, and a teacher will attend a *Reading Recovery* course in Coláiste Mhuire, Marino. A home/school/school/ liaison co-ordinator is based in another school in the area and she works with this school community for one day each week. She organises events regularly for parents and Irish language and conversation classes also. The school authorities co-operate with local and national committees to support the implementation of the curriculum throughout the school and to give every pupil opportunities to participate in interesting activities across the range of the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities.

The School Completion Programme operates in Ballymun and the school participates in this project. The local drugs taskforce finances the breakfast club for pupils who are in need and this provision acts as an incentive for pupils to attend school. With the assistance of various organisations that are working in the area, pupils are afforded opportunities to participate in art projects, writing workshops with a well-known author, drama productions, book fairs, science projects and programmes to improve literacy and Mathematics in Ballymun. The support that is available is very worthwhile, as is the beneficial co-operation between the school and the various organisations that are active in Ballymun, seeking to lessen the effects of educational disadvantage.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- A positive atmosphere is fostered in the school and respectful recognition is given to every member of the school community.
- The board of management works earnestly and effectively and the signs of its good influence in the school are significant.
- The high level of teaching skills, which were identified during the evaluation in the mainstream classes and in the support settings, is commended.
- The principal is a capable, perceptive leader who directs the school democratically and with understanding.
- Excellent care is devoted to the promotion of Irish in the school and it is obvious that the pupils have an interest in the language and in their Irish culture.
- The parents are commended on the central part they take in the life of the school.
- The breadth of the geography curriculum and the wide range of resources, which are available to develop the geographical skills of the pupils, are praised

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

- Every policy should be signed and dated by the chairperson of the board of management and each one should have a target review date.
- It would be worthwhile reviewing the template which is in use for short-term planning, in order to give more information on teaching methods, learning activities and assessment instruments.
- It is recommended that the staff should proceed immediately with the review and the development of the DEIS plan to further the good provision for pupils who are disadvantaged.

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.