Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Gaelscoil Bhréifne
Railway Road, Cavan
Uimhir rolla: 20026G

Date of inspection: 22 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Gaelscoil Bhreifne was undertaken in March 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 Drama. 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.

INTRODUCTION – SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Gaelscoil Bhreifne is a multi-denominational, co-educational all-Irish school, which is under the patronage of Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge. The school was founded in 1995 and is located in pre-fabricated buildings on the site of the scouts’ den in Cavan town. Enrolment figures are decreasing for some time. The majority of the pupils maintain a good attendance.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils enrolled in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream classes in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on the school staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream class teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers working in support roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs assistants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit, mission or vision

The aim of the school is to provide a very good quality of education for pupils through the medium of Irish, in partnership with their parents, in a happy, stimulating environment. In order to ensure the fulfilment of this aim, a positive learning atmosphere is fostered where respect for all persons and their culture is supported.

1.2 Board of management

The board of management has been established in accordance with appropriate procedures. Particular responsibilities are delegated to members and they work enthusiastically in the interest of school improvement. Meetings of the board are convened regularly. Minutes are maintained, but it is recommended that more comprehensive records be kept of the meetings. Although financial matters are discussed at meetings, a written report on the income and expenditure of the board should be made available at every meeting. It is recommended, also, that the accounts be inspected by an external auditor every year. The board participates in a school planning process. Regular communication is maintained with the school community. The board confirmed at the pre-evaluation inspectorate meeting that the school’s priorities at present are the improvement of the pupils’ education and the provision of a permanent building. It is worthwhile proceeding now
with this definite focus, regarding the development and the improvement of every aspect of the school.

1.3 In-school management

The principal, the deputy principal and a teacher with a special duties post operate as the in-school management. The newly-appointed principal directs all school activities capably and she is commended for her leadership with regard to matters of school improvement. It is praiseworthy that she communicated with all parties, at the beginning of her term as principal, to identify the needs of the school. The school is administered effectively and its chronicles are maintained carefully and accurately. The principal has a central role in the promotion of Irish as the main language of communication in the school. Pupils’ learning and advancement is of primary concern to the principal. She fosters an atmosphere of openness among members of staff and gives them clear direction and positive leadership. The talents of the teachers are acknowledged and their efforts are affirmed regularly.

The in-school management team has suitable administrative, curricular and pastoral responsibilities and the duties are performed diligently. The principal is clearly supported by the staff and there is a culture of co-operation in evidence among all staff members. The teachers are creditably focused on the process of continuing school development.

1.4 Management of relationships and communication with the school community

Good relations are discernible between the school and its community and effective communication is cultivated between school and home. Some parents play an important part in the life of the school, for example, by way of providing craft workshops, by preparing costumes for dramas and by helping with matters of sport. A parents’ committee did operate in the school, but has not done so for some time. It is recommended that the board of management give every support to parents to establish a new committee in order to foster partnership in their children’s learning and to support school development. The parents get appropriate information regarding their children’s progress through annual school reports and parent teacher meetings.

1.5 Management of pupils

The management of pupils behaviour is based on positive affirmation and on respect for everyone. It promotes the personal and social development of pupils to very good effect. Effective use is made of regular assemblies to promote the pupils’ positive attitude towards the school and to strengthen their self-esteem. The pupils of the school are well-behaved, courteous and eager to work. They display loyalty towards the Irish language and pride in their school.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 Whole-school and classroom planning

The newly-appointed principal is commended for her leadership with respect to renewing and directing the school planning process. There is a practical approach to planning and it responds to the specific needs of the school. A strategic plan has been devised to identify priorities and an action plan has been provided to guide implementation. It is reported that in general members of the teaching staff devise school policies and the draft policies are then considered and approved by the board of management. Representatives from various parties, including the parents,
participated in the design of a one particular plan. When the policies are being reviewed or when additional ones are being developed, it would be worthwhile to build on this good practice and establish a structure to ensure the participation of all interested parties in the planning process.

A range of policies relating to the administration of the school has been provided. Some of them, however, should be reviewed to ensure that they comply with current legislation. The curricular policies that have been devised to date focus on the needs of the school and give definite direction to teachers with regard to teaching and learning. It is important that plans are devised for all aspects of the curriculum.

The teachers prepare a range of resources to support teaching and learning and they create a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms. They provide short-term and long-term preparation for their work. In best practice observed during the inspection, specific teaching objectives were clearly defined and suitable methodologies, learning activities, assessment and integration modes delineated. Appropriate provision was also made for multi-classes and for the various learning needs of the pupils. It is recommended that this good practice be developed on an agreed whole-school basis. Records are currently maintained of the progress in teaching and learning in the short-term planning. It would be worthwhile to review this system and to agree an approach which would provide greater clarity and which could be used to monitor the implementation of the school plan.

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

Effective strategies are implemented to create a context for the use of Irish as the main language of communication in the school. An Irish atmosphere is discernible in the school and the pupils display a great respect for the language.

Various opportunities are afforded to pupils to develop their listening skills. Oral language lessons have a good structure and the language input is appropriately taught. Effective use is made of various strategies to develop pupils’ ability to communicate and they communicate fluently in the language. In some of the classes, however, a lack of accuracy and a dearth of vocabulary inhibits pupils’ speech and sentence structure is poor. It is recommended that steps be taken to ensure that the language exemplars are taught progressively throughout the school and that an assessment system for Irish be implemented on an whole-school basis.
Advantageous use is made of pre-reading strategies to enable pupils to begin Irish reading. Reading skills are developed systematically throughout the school. In the lessons observed, preliminary discussions were conducted on the reading material and new language exemplars taught and used in various contexts. Pupils’ prediction and word recognition skills are suitably developed. Some pupils read accurately and with understanding. It would be worthwhile to devise and implement a phonetics and phonological scheme to advance the pupils’ oral and reading skills. A certain range of reading material is provided. It is recommended, however, that a series of graded reading books be provided for the teaching of reading and that additional material be provided for wider reading.

The pupils practise functional writing and they are also enabled to do some creative writing. It is suitably monitored. It is recommended that this work be built upon and a writing process approach be implemented in the school to enable the pupils to practise guided and free writing regularly from early years onwards. There is a need to organise mini-lessons to teach the syntax of sentences and grammar in the context of writing to some pupils. It would be worthwhile integrating this work with other curricular subjects in order to develop the writing abilities of the pupils further.

**English**

Pupils’ oral language skills are developed effectively during a range of talk and discussion activities across curriculum areas and during discrete oral language lessons. Suitable oral language activities are organised to stimulate discussion in whole-class settings. Pupils’ higher-order thinking skills are suitably developed through teachers’ judicious questioning. While abilities in pupils’ oral language vary, the majority display good standards of competence in the use of language. The development of a discrete whole-school oral language programme would ensure continuity and progression in the development of pupils’ language skills and would provide for consistency of approach throughout the school. Pupils’ appreciation of and response to poetry is actively nurtured and their creative abilities are suitably developed.

A wide range of strategies is used effectively to develop pupils’ reading skills. In the infant classes systematic attention is given to the promotion of emergent and early reading and a variety of effective approaches is employed. Reading skills are appropriately extended as pupils progress through the school. There is a consistent approach to developing phonological awareness and structures are in place to monitor the acquisition of sight vocabularies. Shared reading with peers further augments the development of pupils’ literacy skills. In general, pupils read with a good level of accuracy, fluency and comprehension appropriate to their abilities. They are provided with suitable opportunities to respond to text in a variety of ways.

Pupils engage in a range of functional writing tasks that cultivate good spelling, punctuation and an understanding of grammar. They write confidently in various genres including stories, poems, letters, descriptions and procedural writing. To build on this good practice a structured whole-school approach to process writing should be adopted, with particular focus on the range of genres to which they are exposed and the various audiences for which they write. Supports provided for pupils during writing activities should include mini-lessons to improve conventions of writing where necessary.

**3.2 Mathematics**

A whole-school plan has been devised for Mathematics to ensure continuity and consistency of approach on a whole-school basis. The effort, which is being made by the staff to raise standards
of achievement in Mathematics, is commended. The lessons are well structured and effective use is made of concrete materials to teach mathematical concepts and to develop pupils’ skills. In some classes, suitable emphasis is placed on mental arithmetic and the pupils are enabled to solve simple problems. It is recommended that this important work be extended to all classes to further develop pupils’ problem-solving skills. It would be worthwhile now to make greater use of the environment to show pupils the usefulness of Mathematics. There is a need to differentiate the teaching content even further and to use activity methods in order that pupils would engage in challenging work according to their abilities.

3.3 Drama

The positive use that teachers make of drama to entice pupils to explore their feelings and engage their imaginations is commended. In the drama classes observed, a safe emotional and physical environment was created for pupils so that they could enter the fictional world easily and comfortably. The participation of pupils was cultivated to advantage and their co-operative skills were developed capably during the learning activities. The pupils derive enjoyment from drama lessons and they succeed in developing their investigative, empowering and empathetic skills pleasantly and purposefully. They display self-confidence in their own ability in drama. Drama is integrated profitably with various areas of the curriculum. It is praiseworthy that various classes present dramas for the school community on a regular basis.

3.4 Assessment

Effective use is made of various assessment methods in the school. Included are: teacher observation, checklists, collections of the pupils’ work, some individual profiles and tasks and tests that the teachers devise themselves. Standardised tests are administered to assess the achievement of pupils in Mathematics and English. Effective use is made of assessment to determine the progress of pupils in learning, to identify special education needs and to give information to parents. It would be worthwhile to further analyse assessment results. This analysis could be used to assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies and to assist co-operative planning between the class teachers and the support teachers. It would be worthwhile to add to the range of diagnostic tests that are in use in the education support room, in order to further analyse pupils’ learning difficulties and subsequently provide suitable programmes for them. It is recommended that files are organised in all classes to record each pupil’s progress.

4. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR PUPILS

4.1 Pupils with special educational needs

A full-time learning-support teacher and a part-time resource teacher facilitate the learning of pupils with special education needs. A comprehensive policy for special education has been provided by the school. There is need to ensure, however, that the English version is compatible with the Irish version. There is a variety of practice in place with regard to the design of the learning plans for pupils with special educational needs. Although regular contact is made with mainstream class teachers and parents, greater emphasis should be placed on their involvement in devising learning programmes and in their implementation and review. It is necessary to ensure, also, that the learning targets are suitable for the level of ability of the individual pupil and are achievable within a certain period of time. It is recommended that weekly planning and progress
records be maintained. Teaching methodologies and learning activities should be outlined in planning and reviewed, as is necessary.

The learning-support teacher provides supplementary teaching in English and Mathematics for pupils who have learning difficulties. Supplementary support is delivered by means of withdrawal of pupils from mainstream classrooms to receive group or individual tuition and through some team teaching. Active teaching methodologies are employed to develop pupils’ literacy and mathematical skills.

Suitable emphasis is placed on the recognition of common words, on the development of phonemic and phonological awareness, on the use of a range of teaching strategies and on the understanding of mathematical concepts. In certain cases, Mathematics is taught bilingually. One language should only be used in the teaching of Mathematics so that the mathematical language of the pupil is developed systematically and a corresponding progress made in the understanding of concepts. The learning-support teacher organises paired reading for all pupils in the school. It is reported that this project is succeeding well and its effectiveness is manifest in pupils’ progress. In some of the classes, in-class support is employed in the development of pupils’ phonological skills. It would be worthwhile to place greater emphasis on the co-ordination of the support and to further develop the in-class work of the support teachers. This work should be pre-planned in partnership with mainstream teachers to ensure that an agreed range of teaching strategies to suit the varying abilities of the pupils is implemented, especially in Mathematics.

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

The school welcomes pupils from all backgrounds. There is a small number of pupils in this school from a disadvantaged background and the school attends appropriately to their varying needs.

5. CONCLUSION

The school has strengths in the following areas:

- The diligent work of the board in relation to the management of the school is recognised.
- The principal gives effective leadership to all the parties and she directs the continuing development of the school systematically.
- The diligence and resoluteness of the teachers regarding their work is commended. Their efforts to improve the achievements of the pupils, especially in Irish and Mathematics, is praiseworthy.
- A happy Irish learning atmosphere is cultivated in the school and the pupils show respect for one another, loyalty to the Irish language and enthusiasm for their work.
- The literacy skills of the pupils in English are being developed to advantage.
- The aesthetic ability of the pupils is being developed effectively during the teaching of drama.

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

- The board of management should ensure the continuing improvement and development of the school and the full implementation of the identified priorities.
• Every effort should be made to re-establish the parents’ association in the school, in order to develop the parents’ partnership in their children’s education and to support school development.
• It is recommended that the development and review of school policies be continued within an agreed timeframe and that a whole-school approach be agreed with respect to teacher planning.
• It would be worthwhile to develop further the problem-solving skills of the pupils in Mathematics.
• It is recommended that an agreed whole-school approach to process writing in Irish and English be implemented.
• Further analysis of the assessment results of pupils should be conducted and additional diagnostic tests used so that suitable learning programmes are implemented for those with varying ability levels.
• It is recommended that appropriate planning be outlined for pupils with special educational needs and their progress recorded on a regular basis.
• Co-operative team teaching and in-class support should be further developed to appropriately meet the needs of pupils with varying ability levels.

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.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

The board of management wishes to thank the inspector who conducted the whole-school evaluation. The recommendations made were well considered and helpful. The inspector understood the challenges facing the school in recent years. It was acknowledged that it had made improvements and had now reached a ‘turning point’. This acknowledgment gives us hope and encouragement. The strengths of the school were recognised in this report. The challenges that have been overcome were also noted as were the areas that require further development. In particular the good manners, courtesy, diligence and loyalty of the pupils to the Irish language were recognised. This indicates to us that the school is fulfilling its responsibility and vision with regard to Gaelscolaíocht for the people of Cavan. We are very satisfied and proud of the recognition deservedly given to the pupils and to everybody involved in the school including teachers, parents and the board of management. In our code of behaviour particular emphasis is placed on encouraging pupils to behave well. Pupils’ talents are recognized and celebrated each week during assembly. While we ourselves understand the value of this pupil affirmation it is good that it is also recognised by a Department of Education and Skills inspector.

We are all working diligently and collaboratively under difficult circumstances as the school is not yet housed in a permanent building. We hope that the Department of Education and Skills will soon provide assistance to the school to enable us create a more suitable learning environment for pupils. We are optimistic that, if we succeed in achieving this goal, we will function more effectively in an environment that is deserved by these pupils.

The school seeks the support of the Department of Education and Skills in its work to provide education through the medium of our native language for the people of Cavan.

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

Following recommendations made by the inspector:

1. A parents’ committee was established in the school after Easter and a fun day was organised for pupils, their families and friends. Everybody enjoyed it and we look forward to further activities that will be organised in the future.
2. The principal is now acting as secretary of the board of management to ensure that minutes are accurately recorded in Irish and essential procedures are followed.
3. The board of management intends to employ an external auditor to audit school accounts.
4. The board of management is now clear on its role in school planning and in the implementation of policies.
5. The school staff understand the need for the provision of a certain timeframe to support pupils with learning difficulties and special educational needs and to review their progress. Psychological assessments will be sought for all pupils with special educational needs in order to fully understand their difficulties and how best to support them.
6. Despite disappointment with regard to the board of management’s efforts and applications for the provision of a permanent school up until now, it is hopeful that there will be fruitful results to its work and the next application to the Planning and Building Unit will be successful.

This is a translation of the school response which was submitted by the board of management in Irish.