

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Whole-School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning**

**REPORT**

**Gairmscoil na bPiarsach  
Ros Muc, County Galway  
Roll number: 71380N**

**Date of inspection: 7 May 2015**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SKILLS**  
**INSPECTORATE**

# **Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning**

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in Gairmscoil na bPiarsach. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management of the school 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***

Gairmscoil na bPiarsach is a co-educational, all-Irish post-primary school located in the west Connemara Gaeltacht. The school operates under the auspices of the Galway-Roscommon Education and Training Bord (ETB). The school participates in the Department of Education and Skills' action plan on educational inclusion, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). The majority of students come from families who speak Irish at home.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management fulfils its duties effectively and has an active role in the development of the school.
- Senior management shows very good leadership to the school community and has a clear vision for a school improvement programme.
- Overall, the scope of the posts of responsibility does not reflect the school's current needs and developmental priorities.
- The diligence and commitment of the staff are a key strength of the school and the teachers have a strong sense of volunteerism and goodwill.
- Very good progress has been made in important areas of the DEIS plan but some key areas still need to be developed: integrating literacy and numeracy strategies across the curriculum and increasing students' achievements.
- Subject plans and programmes were generally of a good standard.
- A broad and balanced curriculum programme is provided, especially in the context of the size of the school, as well as a broad range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

- The care of students is given priority within the whole school community.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good or good in the majority of lessons observed; the need for significant improvement was identified in a small minority of cases.
- Aspects of self-evaluation practice are evident in the work undertaken in the last five years; the school community demonstrates that it is well capable of carrying out the school improvement process.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- Under the leadership of the principal, more strategic use should be made of the six-step activity planning process to promote the school improvement agenda. This relates to the development priorities identified in the DEIS plan and as part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) programme.
- A review of the duties of the posts of responsibility is recommended so that the responsibilities identified and current needs of the school are more closely aligned and serve the strategic development of the school.
- It is recommended that DEIS, SSE and subject planning focus on the implementation of a targeted number of literacy and numeracy strategies across the curriculum.
- Subject and programme development planning at departmental level should be developed by clearly specifying learning outcomes, methodologies, resources and assessment methods.
- It is essential that more robust analysis on state examination results be carried out at subject department level as a basis for agreeing an improvement programme as part of the DEIS plan.
- Differentiated approaches and practices regarding collaborative learning should be developed and extended across all subject areas.
- It would be beneficial to review the school's draft assessment policy to develop and improve practice regarding *assessment for learning* and homework practices.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The current board of management, which is at the end of its term, is appropriately established. The board members are rooted in the community and have expertise in board of management functions as well as matters pertaining to the provision of Irish-medium post-primary education. Each board member has undergone training for his/her role and board meetings have been held regularly to date. The board has given its full support to the senior management of the school. The ETB provides a very good level of support to the school and to education through Irish. At the time of the evaluation, although a new board had been appointed, a meeting had yet to be convened for reasons outside of the board's control.

The board has adopted a range of policies that fulfil the responsibilities of the school. A policy review cycle has been delineated and the board reviews policies regularly with the other school partners. The board had not adopted the health and safety statement formally; the board is strongly recommended to rectify this without delay.

The board has identified a wide range of development priorities in consultation with staff and other partners. These comprise the development of school infrastructure, including information and communications technology (ICT), teaching and learning, curricular provision, and implementation of the objectives of the DEIS 2014-17 plan and the 2014 SSE plan.

Very good progress has been made on infrastructural developments. In order to progress a whole-school improvement plan for the other developmental areas agreed, the board should rank priorities in order of importance and include the opinions of the entire school community. The DEIS and SSE plans should be more strategic, with definite goals, recognised actions, as well as a timeframe to undertake this strategic process. It would be desirable to include regular progress reports on the action planning process on the agenda of meetings of the various partners.

The quality of communication in the school community is very good. The board provides agreed reports to staff and to the meetings of the parents' committee. Parents are made welcome and listened to in the school. Two recommendations are made to improve communications. Currently, the principal prepares a short annual report for the ETB on the operation of the school. This report is an area for improvement and it is recommended that a more comprehensive report be prepared for submission to the ETB and other partners. It is also recommended that arrangements be made to facilitate additional communication between parents, students and the board, and that convene formal meetings be convened from time to time.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

The principal and deputy principal work well together and show very good leadership to the teaching staff and to the school community in areas of their roles. They both strongly believe in partnership and have a democratic approach to management. As a result, the staff support them as together they engage in the provision of Irish-medium education in a collaborative and successful way. In the context of the current arrangements, however, the principal's workload may become unsustainable in the long term. It is recommended that the senior management roles be reviewed to devolve some responsibilities to the deputy principal and to build leadership capacity across the school.

At the next strand of school management is the middle management team: two teachers have posts of responsibility. Overall, the scope of the posts of responsibility does not serve the current requirements of the school or the improvement priorities. It is recommended that the duties pertaining to the posts of responsibility be reviewed to ensure that they serve the current requirements of the school, such as DEIS and SSE planning and subject planning. Regular, formal meetings between senior management and middle management staff should be held. This does not happen currently, except in the case of one post holder. It is also recommended that an approach be formulated to report to the board on fulfilment of posts.

As there are only two teachers with posts of responsibility, the implementation of many responsibilities depends on the self-motivation and goodwill of the various other staff members. Many of the teachers take on additional responsibilities, thereby supporting the provision of a broad curriculum and a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular

events. This commitment ensures the provision of a holistic education for students. This work is recognised by both management and teachers.

Management strongly supports continued professional development (CPD) of teachers and various CPD inputs have been provided to staff over the past few years. It is recommended that a professional development plan be devised for the coming years. The analysis of strengths, opportunities, challenges and threats (SWOT), as already carried out by the majority of subject departments, is a good starting point for this endeavour.

A wide range of subjects relating to school life is discussed comprehensively at staff meetings. Improvement proposals arising from these discussions are implemented in a systematic and timely fashion. Decisions made and details such as who takes responsibility and agreed deadlines are documented clearly. There is a need to place additional emphasis on aspects of the DEIS plan at staff meetings and to include strategies for literacy, numeracy and student achievement in these discussions. The number of strategies chosen under the seven DEIS themes should be reduced and agreed as a team. It would be beneficial to agree a balance of whole-school strategies as well as in-class measures for literacy and numeracy.

The DEIS and SSE planning is co-ordinated by the principal. The co-ordination of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) comes under the remit of a post holder. The JCSP plan was not presented to the inspectors during the assessment, however, and there is no reference in the DEIS and SSE plans to the JCSP plan. It is recommended that these omissions be reviewed and that the DEIS and JCSP plans be amalgamated. It is essential that a structure be formulated to combat the current weaknesses in monitoring the DEIS process. It would be worthwhile to use the lessons learned from the DEIS 2011-2014 cycle in following the six-step strategic process in a more exacting manner for the 2014-2017 cycle.

The quality of curriculum plans ranged from very good to those with more strengths than weaknesses. Among the characteristics of best practice were comprehensive templates, teachers' reflective notes, actions taken based on the recommendations of other inspection reports relating to the school, records of inservice, analysis of state examination results, the findings of SWOTs, and subsequent action plans. These characteristics should be used in all subject planning. The whole-school objectives in the DEIS plan should be the framework within which action plans in all subjects be devised.

A broad and balanced curriculum program is provided, especially in the context of the size of the school. Every effort is made to provide for students' needs and the school generally manages to do so. Computer-based learning and possibilities for developing remote learning are priorities for the school. Sport is provided during Physical Education and provision of an appropriate physical education programme for all students is recommended. A review of the provision for English and Mathematics in the junior cycle, in the context of the guidelines laid out in the relevant circulars, is also recommended.

The procedures for supporting student management are very good. The school's code of behaviour is very comprehensive and a very clear ladder of referral in respect of disciplinary issues is laid out therein. The good behaviour of students and high standard of fluency in Irish were noted during the evaluation.

The student council is elected democratically and is active in a range of school activities. The acquisition of the fourth green flag is commended. In the past two years, '*Duais an Phiarsaigh*', a language and culture award, has been awarded to one student in each year. It is recommended that this good practice be built upon by developing the leadership roles of students in the promotion of the Irish language.

There is good provision for students with special educational needs (SEN). A co-ordinated system has been established to provide supports for students in a range of subjects. Among samples of very good inclusive practice in use are standardised testing and retesting, implementation of individual educational plans, the guidance in learning support and resource support given to all staff, and the introduction of team teaching.

It is recommended that the results of the standardised retests be used to amend whole-school strategies for literacy and to develop numeracy strategies. More than one formal meeting per term would enhance this process. It would be worthwhile installing a software package on students' tablets, and on the school's own computer system, to support the development of literacy. It is also recommended that team teaching be further developed and the roles of special needs assistants be defined in planning for SEN.

A key strength of the school is the sense of belonging evident among the school community. This is supported by the findings from questionnaires. The shared understanding that the school values the individual learning ability of each child, and the development of their ability in a happy learning atmosphere rather than only valuing academic achievement, is commended.

The arrangements for transfer from primary school are very good. A specific care team is in place and there are good structures for the provision of supports for the care needs of the students, including friendship awareness week, a student suggestion box and a nominated anti-bullying person. The School Completion Programme and the home-school-community liaison officer provide central supports for the education of the entire school community. There is scope to formalise the role of the care team in line with the guidelines in the publication *Student Support teams in Post-Primary Schools 2014*.

Practice and planning regarding Guidance are very good, and the provision of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is good and reflective of the needs of the students.

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*.

### **1.3 Management of facilities**

School facilities are very well managed and maintained. At the time of the evaluation, four new classrooms were under construction and the insulation of the whole school was planned. Photographs of school events and pupil achievements are displayed in the school corridors.

Substantial developments have been made to the provision and usage of ICT as a means of communication and as a tool to support learning. One of the short-term priorities for the school's ICT is the development of a cloud computing system. It is recommended that a formal computer-based learning plan be developed to guide work in this area of school life in the future. As part of this plan, it would be beneficial to deal with the difficulties arising from students' computers being out of order for periods of weeks or months.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### **2.1 The quality of learning and teaching**

During the evaluation sixteen lessons were observed with nineteen teachers, almost the entire teaching staff. There was positive interaction between teachers and students in all classes.

In almost all lessons observed good teaching and learning methodologies were employed and teaching and learning were of a high quality in half of the classes. In a few cases, teaching and learning techniques contained weaknesses and scope for development was evident.

All lessons were well prepared and in the best lessons good resources, including ITC, were used as an effective support for teaching and learning. Short-term planning was of good quality or high quality in the majority of lessons, but in certain cases there was a need to define learning objectives more clearly. The most effective lessons contained very good structure and good pace, learning outcomes were shared with the students and reviewed before the end of the lesson.

In a small number of lessons, there was no time left at the end of the lesson to review the work of the lesson and assess the achievement of learning outcomes, or the teacher himself/herself summarised the subject of the lesson. It is recommended that there be reflection on the reason for facilitating a debriefing session with students as a key part of each lesson.

Best practice was observed in those lessons where various opportunities for active learning were created through the use of questioning, group work and practicing practical skills. In these lessons, an appropriate range of questions was utilised that illustrated differentiated approaches, the teachers supported students' needs during task-based work, and teacher directions and explanations were clear.

The development of differentiated approaches across the curriculum is recommended in terms of lesson content, in class activities and in post-learning tasks. During group work, it would be worthwhile to enable students to achieve defined learning goals, to assign different roles to group members and to provide groups with the opportunity to demonstrate acquired learning to their fellow students.

There was an emphasis on literacy in over half of the classes observed, with keyword strategies being the dominant method. The development of students' numeracy was observed only in a small number of cases. It is essential that the strategies used to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills be further developed on a whole-school basis, supporting the goals set out in the DEIS and SSE plans.

Homework was assigned and noted in homework diaries in almost all lessons observed. A review of a random sample of homework diaries showed that this was not a regular practice. A survey of teachers as part of the SSE process indicated that the tendency among students not to complete homework is the biggest obstacle to teaching and learning. It would be beneficial for student learning, therefore, to discuss expectations regarding homework at department and whole-school level. It is also necessary, at staff level, to carry out more efficient management of homework diaries in the school. It is recommended that decisions arising from such discussion be incorporated within the assessment policy that was being drafted at the time of the evaluation.

In the majority of lessons, effective monitoring and assessment are carried out on students' progress and competence using a range of assessment methods, but a sample of students' work also showed that work is very seldom corrected in a manner that would assist learning. Recommendations in this area have been made in previous inspections of this school.

Teachers are based in classrooms and attractive learning environments were created in the majority of classrooms. There is substantial scope for development in a minority of cases.

Although some analysis is carried out on the results of state examinations, there is a need for more robust analysis and for the development of a programme of improvements based on this. It will be essential to agree school strategies, within the DEIS framework, to improve the rate of participation and results of higher-level students in Junior Certificate subjects as an initial step to improve attainment at Leaving Certificate level.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

Two recommendations were made previously at management level and both related to assessment. Some progress has been made to develop a larger range of assessment methods and the drafting of an assessment policy was commenced this year. The report on Home Economics recommended that the school continue in its efforts to support students to sit their exams in Irish. The school's Irish-language policy clearly states that Irish is the language used in examinations. There was not sufficient evidence in the students' work to suggest that this is actually the case. It is the school's responsibility to implement in practice the policy agreed and adopted by the school community.

The recommendation on planning made in the report on Construction Studies and Materials Technology (Wood) has yet to be implemented.

#### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

Although progress was noted in the implementation of the recommendations made in the four inspection reports issued to the school to date, scope remains to develop differentiated approaches as well as techniques to enhance participation of students in teaching and learning.

### **4. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

Evidence of school's engagement in self-evaluation is to be seen in the work completed over the past five years. There is a need, however, to place the school development planning process on a more formal footing. The development of a more strategic and progressive approach is recommended, in line with the guidelines on school self-evaluation. The formulation of structures to facilitate the co-operative participation of all staff members under the direction of senior staff members would greatly assist this strategic process.

The management and staff of the school are committed to developing the personal and educational abilities of the students, and the school community illustrates a good capacity to progress the improvement process of the school and to implement the recommendations of this report.

# **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 and the school community welcomes this positive report on the work of the school. We welcome the positive aspects of the school that were acknowledged during the inspection. As a school, we are very proud of the diligence and commitment of staff members and the volunteering spirit that exists among teachers. The care of students is, without doubt, given primary importance across the entire school community. As a board, we commend the standard of teaching and learning which in general was very good. We congratulate senior management for the leadership they provide as well as for their vision for school improvement.

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

- To carry out a review of the DEIS plan for 2014-17 and the school's SSE plan in terms of developmental priorities. An analysis of certificate examinations will form part of this work  
The beginning of the school year 2015/16 and a review at the end of the school year.
- To conduct a review of the posts of responsibility  
The beginning of the school year 2015/16 and a review at the end of that school year.
- To review the number and effectiveness of strategies for literacy and numeracy.  
The beginning of the school year 2015/16 and a review at the end of that school year.
- To foster and develop differentiated approaches as well as practice in relation to collaborative learning across all subjects.
- To ratify the draft assessment policy.  
Staff meeting 30/11/2015.
- To ratify the draft Health and Safety statement.  
At the start of the school year 2015/16 and at a meeting of the board of management on the 28/09/2015.
- CPD plan to be developed.  
Staff meeting 24/09/2015 and during the school year 2015/16.
- To draft a JCSP plan.  
Staff meeting 24/09/2015.
- Good practice in relation to subject planning to be in place in all subjects.  
By the end of the school year 2015/16.
- Adherence to Department circular letters in relation to the number of periods for Mathematics and English is to be in place for the school year 2015/16.
- To provide the students of the school with a suitable PE programme.  
To be discussed with the GRET.B.
- To review practices in relation to homework and diaries.

Before the staff meeting of 30/11/2015.

- To implement the outstanding recommendations from previous evaluations. Without delay.

*(This is a translation of the School Response submitted by the Board of Management.)*