

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Ursula
Strandhill Road, Sligo
Uimhir rolla: 18979F

Date of inspection: 19 November 2014



1. Introduction

Scoil Ursula is a co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Elphin situated on the Strandhill Road in Sligo town. There are twenty-three teachers on the staff, including four teachers who are working in a job-share capacity. The school employs three full-time and one part-time special-needs assistants, a secretary and a caretaker. There were 379 pupils enrolled at the time of the evaluation. Attendance is very good. This whole-school evaluation focused on the quality of teaching and learning in Gaeilge, English, Mathematics and Drama. 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.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the **main strengths** of the work of the school:

- The well-informed and committed board of management provides very good governance to the school.
- The principal very effectively leads a dedicated and very professional team of teachers. He promotes a culture of collaboration and commitment to the development of the school.
- A sense of community and inclusiveness, a welcoming school atmosphere and positive interactions between staff, pupils and parents characterise the school.
- The pupils are very well behaved and are commended for their interest, enthusiasm and engagement with all learning activities.
- The overall quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in the school is good and some excellent examples were evident.
- The parents' association is very active and very supportive through engagement with a range of activities on behalf of the school.
- The school's engagement with school self-evaluation (SSE) and the school improvement process is very effective.

The following **main recommendations** are made:

- Clearly stated curriculum objectives and records of achievement of learning outcomes should form the basis of short-term teacher planning.
- Poetry and song repertoires should be further developed across the school.
- B'fhíu athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an bplean scoile chun an ard-cleachtas sa Ghaeilge i seomraí áirithe a chinntiú i ngach seomra ranga trasna na scoile. (*The school plan in Irish should be reviewed to guide and embed the excellent practices observed in some classrooms across the school.*)
- The school should ensure clear objectives and on-going evaluation of the many initiatives in place, including *Aistear*.

3. Quality of School Management

- The very effective governance provided by the chairperson and board of management to the school is highly commendable. Minutes of meetings evidence wide-ranging discussions and the active role of the board in policy development. The school is well run and accounts are certified annually. The board supports the continuing professional development of the staff.
- The principal promotes a positive school climate, a culture of distributed leadership and good working relationships. He attends very effectively to the organisation, management and day-to-day administration of the school. Reporting systems and maintenance of roll books and school records are very effective. The principal is ably assisted by the hard-working in-school management team that shows great dedication to the school. Regular meetings and related activities are scheduled by this team to support its work and development. A formal policy on post allocation should be devised. Recent strategies to facilitate curriculum leadership in the school should be further strengthened under the guidance of the principal. The effectiveness of initiatives recently undertaken including *Aistear* and literacy station teaching should be monitored and evaluated.
- The school is characterised by a sense of community and inclusiveness. Very good relationships with the school community are evident with effective and open communication between home and school facilitated in particular by the school's very attractive website, class blogs, text messages and the Aladdin system. The parents' association provides valuable support to and active engagement with the school, in terms of substantial fund-raising events and participation in the life of the school. Members demonstrated a clear understanding of their role as a link between the parent body and the school. School policies are provided in draft format on the website for comment by parents. Evidence provided by questionnaires issued as part of this evaluation indicates a very high level of parental satisfaction with the school. Almost all responses indicate that the parents are happy with the school and think that their child is doing well in school.
- Print-rich, number-rich classrooms and corridors are bright, colourful and stimulating learning environments that celebrate and enhance pupils' learning. The pupils' work is very well displayed. The school has continued to develop good facilities and a wide range of resources. The team of talented, conscientious teachers conveys high expectations of behaviour. It would be of additional benefit to the school to develop a formal policy of class allocation in order to further the professional development of all staff.
- Pupils are managed very effectively and an atmosphere of mutual respect is evident across the school. The school deals very successfully with a diverse range of needs and nurtures a holistic and caring approach to its pupils. Useful opportunities are provided for pupils' access to and use of information and communication technology (ICT). A commendable variety of diverse extra-curricular activities is available for pupils. Responses in the pupil questionnaires indicate a very high level of pupil satisfaction with almost all pupils saying that they like their school, feel safe there and that they enjoy their lessons and learning. The pupils' council provides a commendable framework for the inclusion of the pupils' voice in the life of the school.
- High quality administrative and secretarial support adds significantly to the life of the school. The contribution made by all ancillary staff facilitates the effective working of the school community. The school buildings, classrooms and grounds are maintained to a

good standard and are attractively presented. SNAs are an important asset in the life of the school.

4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- A comprehensive range of school planning documents has been produced. The planning process is on-going with the systematic review and development of policies. Whole-school curricular planning should include more specific guidance, support and developmental sequences for teaching and learning across all levels in the school and for all abilities.
- Very good progress has been made with the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. Evidence-based evaluation in the provision for literacy and numeracy has guided clear whole-school target-based activities. It is recommended that careful monitoring and review of targets, actions and all initiatives be undertaken. A whole-school system to share effective and best pedagogical practices should be further developed. This will ensure understanding and cohesion of provision and the sharing and implementation of high expectations for learning.
- A whole-school approach was observed in teachers' planning with detailed focus on content objectives. However, short-term classroom plans should focus on specific curriculum objectives and expected learning outcomes. Progress records should then indicate the learning outcomes that have been achieved. These records could then be analysed to promote school improvement more clearly as part of the school self-evaluation process. An agreed whole-school approach should focus on skill development to ensure sequential progression and development in curriculum implementation throughout the school.
- 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*.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- Exemplary teaching practice was observed in some classrooms. The most effective teaching was guided by high expectations for learning, focused and purposeful collaborative engagement by pupils in well-paced and well-structured lessons. A strong work ethic is well established in the school. The willingness of teachers to explore new and innovative approaches and to work collaboratively is very commendable. In-class support, team-teaching and specific interventions to enhance literacy and numeracy are used well.
- Most teachers utilise a suitable variety of teaching methodologies and provide a range of opportunities for pupils to engage in activity and discovery-based learning. Differentiated approaches should be embedded in all mainstream classes to ensure that teaching takes account of the abilities and learning needs of all pupils and that all learners are adequately challenged in their learning.
- Tá éagsúlacht ag baint le caighdeán an teagaisc agus le caighdeán na foghlama sa Ghaeilge sa scoil. Baintear úsáid éifeachtach as straitéisí agus áiseanna éagsúla chun clár cuimsitheach a chur i bhfeidhm i ranganna áirithe. Chun an ard-chleachtas a fheictear i roinnt ranganna a scaipeadh tríd an scoil ní mór anois athbhreithniú a

dhéanamh ar an bplean scoile ionas go mbeadh leanúnachas agus forchéimniú ó rang go rang léiríthe go soiléir. Moltar deiseanna sa bhreis a thabhairt do na daltaí chun a gcumas labhartha sa Ghaeilge a threisiú le béim láidir ar an gcur chuige cumarsáideach. B'fhiú leas níos éifeachtaigh a bhaint as drámaíocht, scéalaíocht, dánta agus rannta. Léann na daltaí le líofacht agus faigheann siad deiseanna chun scríbhneoireacht fheidhmiúil agus scríbhneoireacht phearsanta a chleachtadh.

There is variation in the quality of teaching and learning in Irish in the school. Effective use is made of various strategies and resources to implement a comprehensive programme in some classes. In order to distribute the excellent practice observed in some classrooms, it is timely to review the school plan in order that continuity and sequential development be clearly outlined from class to class. It is recommended that further opportunities be provided to pupils to strengthen their spoken competence in Irish with specific focus on the communicative approach. More effective use should be made of drama, story, poetry and rhyme. The pupils read with appropriate fluency and they are provided with opportunities to engage in both functional and personal writing.

- The quality of teaching, learning and pupil achievement in English is very good overall. The school has introduced a number of very worthwhile initiatives to enhance teaching and learning in English and the benefits of these are now being embedded. A targeted integrated language approach with in-class support is undertaken to good effect. Frequent evaluation of pupil progress will further enhance the pupils' experience. Regular engagement with discrete oral language should now be supplemented with use of language experience charts to reinforce vocabulary development. While some classes have comprehensive poetry repertoires, pupil engagement in recitation is limited in a number of other classes. The staff is advised to compile an expected minimum list of age-appropriate poetry for each class level in the school's language policies. Pupils are afforded regular opportunities to write in a variety of genres. The quality of pupils' handwriting and presentation of written work could be further enhanced through implementation of a whole-school approach.
- Pupil attainment in Mathematics is of a very high standard and the quality of teaching in Mathematics is very good. Aspects of very good practice observed include appropriate use of mathematical language, skilful use of concrete materials and a strong emphasis on active learning strategies. Most lessons provided an appropriate balance between the direct teaching of concepts and collaborative problem-solving. Many pupils displayed an ability to recall number facts swiftly and with understanding. Numeracy-rich environments support the learning strategies. However, the pupils would benefit from a more structured approach to mental mathematics through differentiated strategies including approaches for the more able pupils.
- Very effective practice was observed in some individual Drama lessons. These were structured and paced appropriately with a suitable emphasis on skill development and reference to the approaches laid out in the curriculum. A whole-school approach with greater opportunities for continuity and development from class to class should be introduced now.
- Very good assessment practices were observed throughout the school. Teachers are very well informed about pupil ability and performance in literacy and numeracy. This needs to impact on differentiated approaches in all classrooms and to interlink with the school's SSE and SIP targets. Greater engagement with assessment for learning (AfL) approaches would further support evaluative practices.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

- Considerable recent changes in the special education team (SEN) have been made with two full-time special education teachers and a shared post based in the school. A further two teachers provide part-time resource hours. The school is encouraged to rationalise the staffing available to it at the next available opportunity.
- Close collaboration, both within the school and with external expertise, is evident. The quality of the provision varies from very good to fair. The school has established exemplary systems to track pupil performance. There was evidence of a high level of participation in continuing professional development which has enhanced provision in the school. All SEN teachers were well prepared to teach with some very attractive learning environments provided. Some very good quality individual education plans (IEPs) with SMART targets were provided. The school should ensure that all IEPs are of the same high standard. Meticulous record keeping ensures that progress is carefully monitored.
- A variety of strategies including in-class support, small group work and individual support is provided. More careful planning for in-class support with a clearer emphasis on desired learning outcomes would enhance this aspect of the work. The school should review some of its provision to ensure that the best possible use is made of resources available. In particular, the current provision for pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) needs to be reviewed to ensure that appropriate assessment and monitoring of progress is in place.
- A book rental scheme is well-operated. A strong culture of respect and tolerance is fostered in the school and it sensitively supports pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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 of Scoil Ursula welcomes the very positive Whole School Evaluation conducted recently in the school and accepts the contents and findings of the report.

The Board acknowledges recognition of the school's strengths in relation to the management and leadership of the school, the dedication and professionalism of the staff, the inclusive and welcoming school culture and atmosphere, the behaviour and enthusiasm of our pupils, the quality of the teaching, learning and achievement in the school, the support and engagement of our very active Parents' Association and the school's very effective engagement with the School Self Evaluation and School Improvement process.

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

The Board acknowledges and values the independent, expert contribution of the evaluation team and desires to implement suggestions and guidance aimed at further improving the school as set out in the recommendations of the report. To this end, the following steps are being taken:

- The short term planning template for the school is being adapted and curriculum objectives will be used in these plans.
- Records of achievement of learning objectives will be the basis for an adapted Cuntas Miosúil template for the school.
- A list of mandatory poetry and song repertoires for all classes will be put together by teachers during collaborative planning sessions by the end of the year.
- Tá athbhreithniú ar an bPlean Gaeilge ar siúl anois ionas go mbeidh an ard-chleachtas, breathnaithe ag na cigirí i gcuid de na seomraí ranga, le feiceáil ar fud na scoile. (*A review of the Plean Gaeilge is underway so that excellent practices observed by the inspectors in some classes are replicated throughout the school.*)
- Programmes and initiatives already in place in the school are being evaluated for their effectiveness.
- A formal policy on class allocation is in the process of being developed following a recent staff meeting.
- A formal policy on the allocation and rotation of In-School Management (ISM) posts of responsibility will be formulated at the next ISM team meeting.
- Individual tracking of the supports for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has begun and all members of the SEN team have an agreed set of templates for planning and Cuntais Miosúil in place including more focussed and measurable targets to better meet the needs of the pupils.
- The SEN provision has been rearranged to best suit the present allocation of SEN teachers and the Department of Education & Skills-led cluster arrangement that the school is involved in.