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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**Gaelscoil an Lonnáin
Belfast**

Inspected: March 2008

CONTENTS

Section		Page
	STATISTICAL INFORMATION	
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK	1
3.	MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS	3
4.	CONCLUSION	3

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Gaelscoil an Lonnáin, a co-educational, Irish-medium primary school, was first established in 1999 and achieved grant-aided status in 2005. It is situated in the former St Finian's Primary School in Belfast. The children come mostly from the immediate vicinity of the school between Barrack Street and Lower Springfield Road. There are eleven children in year 1 and a total enrolment of 44. Half of the children are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 The inspection focused on mathematics including information and communication technology (ICT), the provision for special educational needs, the promotion of health and well-being, the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection, and the school's leadership and management.

1.3 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with members of the Board of Governors (governors) and with the children in years 5 and 7. The parents' views on aspects of the life and work of the school were also sought by means of a confidential questionnaire. Forty-four questionnaires were sent to parents by the school; four of the 14 which were returned to the Department of Education (DE) contained written comments. Most of the comments in the questionnaires were very positive. The few matters raised by the parents in the questionnaires were discussed with the Principal and the governors. The parents and the members of the governors commented favourably on the commitment of the staff. The governors endorsed strongly the work of the school and outlined their role in the management of the school. They expressed a very high degree of satisfaction with the work of the Principal and the staff to promote a safe and harmonious learning environment for all the children. The children spoke very favourably about their experiences in school; they indicated that they could get help if required and were content that staff deal sympathetically with their needs.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 The quality of the working relationships between the teachers and the children is excellent. The teachers take time to praise and encourage the children, and the behaviour of the children throughout the course of the inspection was exemplary. The children are encouraged to respect themselves and each other; they respond positively to their teachers and work with high levels of motivation and interest.

2.2 There is a strong sense of community and good team spirit among the teachers and all concerned with the school. There are very strong links with Naíscoil an Lonnáin which is located in the school. Communication with the parents is good and they receive regular information about homework and the topics under study.

2.3 The arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the school have a few strengths. There are, however, important areas for improvement which require prompt action to ensure that the policies and procedures are fully in line with the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars. In particular, the staff need to display information in relation to the designated teachers, consult with the parents and pupils on the school's anti-bullying policy and maintain a Record of Child Abuse Complaints which the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson review at least annually.

2.4 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has important strengths. Attention is paid to the development and implementation of healthy eating and physical activity programmes, for example, healthy eating displays, healthy breaks and lunches and the encouragement to drink water.

2.5 The teachers plan their work on a six-weekly basis and carry out regular evaluations of the programme. The planning currently, however, is not focused clearly enough on the intended learning and hence the evaluations cannot be used to guide future planning. The planning needs to be reviewed and should cover the children's language acquisition as well as the various curricular areas, ensuring sufficient differentiation to meet the needs of all children.

2.6 The teachers are hard-working and they have a good knowledge of the children and their backgrounds; they take a keen interest in the children and seek to promote a caring and supportive learning environment. The teaching observed during the course of the inspection was always sound, and on occasions, it was good. In the best practice observed, teachers used a variety of teaching approaches and engaged the children in a range of meaningful and challenging activities. In these instances, the children were motivated and actively involved in the learning. On other occasions, however, there was insufficient emphasis placed on differentiating the work to meet the varying needs of the children, and at times, the teaching lacked pace and challenge.

2.7 Teachers mark the children's work regularly but too often the marking is clerical. Only occasionally do teachers use marking techniques which give the children direction on how to improve their work. The school's approach to assessment lacks direction.

2.8 The children in the year one class have daily sessions of activity-based learning. Themes and topics are well planned to provide a range of interesting activities that complement the work in other curricular areas and are effective in promoting language and learning. In the lessons observed, the children appeared confident in their work and showed a high level of independence, creative ability and enjoyment.

2.9 The teachers use a commercial scheme for mathematics, supplemented by other teacher-generated resources. In the early years, the teachers place a strong emphasis on active, play-based learning; the children are developing early mathematical language, concepts and understanding appropriate to their age and ability. Mental mathematics is given a high priority in each class and the children's skills in mental and written calculation are generally good. They work co-operatively and purposefully in pairs and in small groups.

2.10 Standards in mathematics by the end of key stage 2 are not as good as they could be. Some children, particularly the more able learners, would benefit from a greater degree of challenge in some of the learning tasks set and in the mathematical activities provided. It is important that the school gathers and uses performance data and attainment information in a planned and focused way to identify under-achievement and low achievement, to inform the teachers' planning, to raise attainment, to ensure progression and to set whole-school, class and individual targets. At the time of the inspection, the C2k system had not been installed. Despite this, the staff have worked hard to try to ensure that the children have some relevant experiences of ICT.

2.11 The class teachers are very conscious of the needs of the children who experience difficulty with their learning and they provide general in-class support for these children. A Special Needs Register does not exist. Therefore, individual education plans have not been devised for some of the children; for others, the targets are not focused enough to facilitate effective evaluation. There is a need for a more formal, rigorous and systematic approach to the provision for special needs. The staff need to review the effectiveness of the current planning for special needs in order to support more effectively the children who experience difficulties in their learning and to determine, monitor and record the progress made by these children.

3. MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

3.1 The Principal has been in post since 2001 in the capacity of Acting-principal until the school received recognition in 2005 when she took on the role as Principal. She is fully committed to the life and work of the school and her concern and care for the children is evident. The school, however, lacks strategic direction and there is an urgent need to review the roles and responsibilities of teachers and to agree the leadership and management priorities of the school. The staff need to agree and implement effective systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of the school's provision at all levels to inform planning and to promote continuing improvement in the school's provision.

3.2 The current school development plan (SDP) does not address the needs of the school and does not comply with the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The staff need to review the SDP in light of the inspection findings and to focus on priorities for development to guide the work of the school in a more strategic manner. With support from external agencies, all the staff and the members of the governors need to be involved in the process of identifying the key priority areas for development. Appropriate action plans should be prepared, success criteria identified, and clear strategies to monitor and evaluate progress agreed and implemented.

3.3 All staff have availed of a range of development opportunities both school- and centre-based delivered by a number of external agencies. There is a need for teachers to develop further their Irish language skills.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the distinctive ethos based on immersion in the Irish language;
- the welcoming, friendly atmosphere of the school;
- the exemplary behaviour of the children;
- the commitment of the Principal and staff to the children and the school;
- the dedication of the governors and parents to the life and work of the school; and
- the strong links with Naíscoil an Lonnáin.

4.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to review the arrangements for Pastoral Care and Child Protection to ensure that the guidance outlined in the relevant DE circulars is fully implemented;
- to review the SDP in light of the inspection findings to guide the work of the school in a more strategic manner; and
- to develop effective systems at all levels to monitor and evaluate the quality of the school's provision to promote continuing improvement.

4.3 In the areas inspected, the school has some strengths in its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified important areas for improvement, which need to be addressed promptly if the school is to meet effectively the needs of all the learners.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

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