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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

St Dallan's Primary School
Warrenpoint

Inspected: October 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 St Dallan's Primary School opened in September 2000 following the amalgamation of St Peter's Boys' Primary School and the Star of the Sea Girl's Primary School in the town of Warrenpoint in County Down. The vast majority of the children come from the town itself and some from the surrounding rural area; the majority walk or come to school by car. Almost one quarter of the children are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 Prior to the inspection, 127 families received a confidential questionnaire seeking their views of the school; almost 43% of them were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and 24 of these contained additional written comments; almost all expressed their confidence in the work of the school and spoke highly of the Principal and teaching staff and of their efforts in establishing the new school; a few sought clarification on some matters which have been discussed with the Principal. The inspection team met with the Board of Governors (governors). The governors, in addition to seeking clarification of the inspection process, expressed their strong support for the school, commenting particularly on the effectiveness of the school's social inclusion policy in ensuring that all children are treated fairly and equitably, the quality and commitment of the teaching and non-teaching staff, the effective communication between the school and the parents, the school's provision for special educational needs (SEN) and the strong leadership of the Principal.

1.3 The inspection team held discussions with a group of children in year 6; all of them reported that they felt safe, were happy and enjoyed their experiences at school; further, they are very clear about pastoral procedures, school rules and safety matters. Twenty five of the teaching staff completed a confidential questionnaire; their responses were very positive on many aspects of the school and any concerns which they raised have been shared with the Principal.

1.4 The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the school is very good. The school has procedures in place which implement fully the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars. The governors, staff, parents and children are fully aware of the school's procedures and have had the opportunity to contribute to a range of effective policies which guide the work of the school. Among the strengths are the high quality of pastoral care provision; the pupils' participation in a wide range of extra-curricular provision; the policy and procedures for addressing bullying issues and the high priority given to the health and well-being of the children. In enhancing this provision, further consideration should now be given to developing the older children's roles and responsibilities as leaders and mentors and in engaging them more fully in the decision-making process.

1.5 The school gives very good attention to promoting health and well-being, including opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. For example, there has been excellent progress in meeting the food-based standards for school dinners, while relevant assemblies and poster displays communicate effectively healthy eating messages that encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

1.6 The inspection focused on the work in English, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in supporting literacy. The inspection also evaluated the school's procedures in relation to pastoral care, including child protection.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 A feature of the school is the staff's commitment to creating a caring and supportive environment. The school has a strong Catholic ethos focused appropriately on the needs of the children. There is a welcoming atmosphere and a strong focus is placed on the development of routines, good manners and behaviour; however, the behaviour of a minority of the children is very challenging. Supervision of the children is very good; movement around the school is orderly.

2.2 The school is very successful in integrating children from other countries into the life of the school. There is good quality provision in English as an Additional Language (EAL).

2.3 The high standards of caretaking and cleaning contribute exceptionally well to the teachers' efforts to provide an attractive environment for the children. The ancillary staff, including the secretaries and classroom assistants and canteen staff make a valued and valuable contribution to the work of the school.

2.4 The teachers are professional, conscientious and hard-working. During the inspection the teaching observed was always satisfactory. In a significant minority of the lessons the quality of teaching was consistently good and in a few lessons it was excellent. In the best practice, there is a good focus on the development of the children's skills, for example, their thinking skills, there is effective differentiation, skilful and challenging questioning and the promotion of extended oral responses. The deployment of a variety of learning and teaching strategies, the children being suitably challenged and engaged, a real learning partnership and a clear sense of enjoyment between the teachers and the children, contribute to effective learning and teaching. The school recognises that, in the interests of greater consistency and in raising standards in learning and teaching, there is a need to share, discuss and disseminate good practice.

2.5 The staff show a strong commitment to promoting many aspects of literacy. There were some good examples of the teachers blending the three modes of language in lessons where reading and writing led to an enhancement of oral literacy and thinking skills. This good practice needs to be disseminated and developed more widely throughout the school. In the lessons observed there were a few examples of effective paired and group work, for example in key stage (KS) 1 where the children were engaged in predicting the development of a story. Again, this should be more widespread to allow talking and listening to extend beyond the question and limited answer stage.

2.6 The standards achieved in reading are generally good. Throughout the school the children have the opportunity to engage in regular reading and related activities. In the best practice the teachers use a variety of texts to foster enjoyment, stimulate discussion and to motivate the children to read. In these instances shared reading is used effectively to develop reading skills and to promote fluency and understanding.

2.7 Within classrooms there is a range of levelled reading materials which children use for independent and home reading. They also have access to the school library and to reading resource areas. The potential offered by these facilities should be further maximised to capture the children's interest and to promote an even more explicit reading culture.

2.8 The children are encouraged to consider a wide variety of writing forms ranging from poetry and play-scripts to persuasive writing and diary entries. The best examples of such writing results in work of a high standard in some classes in both KS1 and KS2. Detailed formative marking of written work by teachers helps children to understand better and improve their written language. The use of dictionaries and reference books is promoted by the teachers and the children avail of these resources, sometimes without the need of prompting from the teachers; children also use ICT as a research tool. The children have benefited from the school's involvement, last year, in external accreditation through the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment for which they produced work of a good quality.

2.9 The school recognises the need to revisit and update the literacy policy and to promote a much greater emphasis on active learning. Furthermore, a focused and robust system of monitoring and evaluating is needed to formulate an effective revised literacy policy and to ensure whole-school implementation across the curriculum. The co-ordination of this process must be a key priority for the school

2.10 Under the guidance of the recently appointed co-ordinator, the teachers in the foundation stage are working towards the implementation of a High Scope approach to their work with the children. There is a relaxed, friendly atmosphere in the classrooms which are attractively presented with colourful displays and samples of the children's work. Communal resource areas are used for extended practical activities and outdoor play facilities are available on a daily basis. During the inspection, the children experienced a range of practical activities which they clearly enjoyed; these activities helped to promote creativity and imagination and develop their thinking skills and personal capabilities. The teachers plan together and use a range of teaching strategies to ensure the needs and interests of the children are met. Appropriate methods of observation are in place to monitor the children's progress and learning. A valuable link has been established with the feeder Nursery School. Although the staff have worked hard to provide new resources and organise areas of play for the children there is a need to extend the range further in order to enhance the experiences on offer throughout the year and ensure opportunities to promote consistently high quality language and learning experiences.

2.11 The teachers have procedures in place to identify those children who need help with their reading, writing and with aspects of their behaviour. The school has identified almost 17% of the children as requiring support with aspects of their learning in literacy and numeracy; 2.4% of the children have statements of particular educational need. Increasingly, their difficulties and needs are being identified, at an early stage, and appropriate education plans are drawn up by the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), teachers who provide support for special needs and the class teachers. The plans are generally well-matched to the needs of the children and they are reviewed regularly by the staff and the parents. The school makes effective use of outside agencies, including educational psychologists, to assist with diagnosis and support. The classroom assistants and learning support assistants provide good support for the children.

2.12 Appropriately, the school has identified three groups for support; those children who require short-term remedial support in literacy and numeracy, those children who require long-term sustained support and those children, within many classes, who are performing at a below average level, but it is anticipated, that with increased well-focused assistance by their class teachers, they will, over time, raise their attainment. For the first two groups, a strong

emphasis is placed on providing a programme of support to address the children's difficulties; significant financial resources are used effectively to enable four experienced part-time teachers and a number of learning support and classroom assistants to help children both in-class and in small withdrawal groups. Well-chosen resources and suitable teaching strategies are used appropriately to support all of the children. In all of the SEN sessions observed, there was a very caring and supportive ethos, the employment of suitable strategies and materials which were well-differentiated and had a strong focus on promoting success and achievement.

2.13 The SENCO has a good understanding of her role; she oversees the special needs programme effectively and, has helped teachers to develop strategies to enable them to address some of the children's particular difficulties and needs through in-class support. There is good liaison between the SEN support staff and the class teachers to ensure progression and continuity in the children learning. The SENCO is well-supported by the other SEN support teachers and by the Principal and staff. A start has been made in monitoring and tracking the progress of individual children. The school is aware that it will be essential, over time, for the class teachers to be supported and trained further so that they are enabled to take an even greater responsibility for the SEN provision of all of the children.

2.14 The school is actively promoting marking for improvement. Currently, the children's work is monitored on a regular basis, the marking, at its best is encouraging, rigorous and focussed on improvement. In addition, corrections and feedback are often shared with the children to raise standards and to set higher expectations of them and to promote their self-esteem.

2.15 The Principal provides strong leadership and has managed the school successfully through a difficult and challenging period in recent times, involving the amalgamation of two schools. Her vision, dedication and hard work are evident in the work of the school, in particular in the strong emphasis placed on meeting the children's pastoral needs. She has been in post for over 5 years is ably assisted by her vice-principal; together they set a highly professional tone for the work of the school which is administered very well with a clear sense of order throughout.

2.16 Following a period where the key focus was appropriately on the successful amalgamation of the two primary schools, the time is now right to shift the emphasis to the curricular priorities for development already largely identified by the school, and to focus strongly on the associated staff and management development that this will require.

2.17 The senior management of the school has a strong vision for the future of the school which focuses on the empowerment of the teaching and support staff, utilising their expertise and creativity and engaging them more fully in staff development focused on school improvement, curriculum innovation and in the school's decision making processes. In addition, by extending the growing partnership between the school, the community and the parents, there is the potential to further enhance the achievements of the school and its strong stature in the local community. There is sufficient expertise and capacity within the teaching staff to enable the school to move forward with confidence.

2.18 The Principal has played a key role in facilitating the development of a sound culture of self-evaluation within the school. The school has already made a start in this area, for example, in the recent good analysis of data available on the children's performance in various standardised tests, and the consequent setting of appropriate targets for improvement. This good practice should be developed further, in particular the various post holders and individual classroom teachers should now be involved even more directly in the setting and meeting of these targets. Equally, the school needs to make more extensive use of performance data, including DE benchmarking information, to review and inform further improvements in learning, and to further improve the standards.

2.19 Much work has gone into the school development plan which is comprehensive and sets out in useful detail an appropriate set of priorities for the medium and longer term. To make this process more manageable, the school should consider prioritising and reducing in number the areas already set out and adjust the subsequent priorities to take into account the detail of the inspection findings. Importantly, the school should add, in the medium term, a clear and succinct assessment of the children's progress and standards of attainment, the teaching and curricular provision, and the extent to which it has met or revised any previous key targets.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the caring, friendly and welcoming atmosphere and its strong Catholic ethos;
- the hard-working staff and the sound quality of the teaching;
- the high quality of pastoral care;
- the strong commitment to supporting those children who require additional help for their learning and the provision in EAL;
- the Principal's successful management of the amalgamation; and
- the professionalism, leadership and vision of the Principal and her Vice-principal and their dedication and commitment to the life and work of the school and the community which it serves.

3.2 The areas for improvement include:

- the greater empowerment of the staff in decision making and in taking on curricular leadership roles and responsibilities, in sharing their expertise and in disseminating good practice in learning and teaching; and
- the need to make more extensive use of performance data and information available to review and inform learning and teaching so as to improve standards.

3.3 In the areas inspected, the school has strengths in many aspects of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified a few areas for improvement in important areas which need to be addressed to meet effectively the needs of all the learners.

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

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