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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

St Malachy's Primary School
Armagh

Inspected: January 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 St Malachy's Primary School is situated in the centre of Armagh. The school is currently celebrating its 50th Anniversary and has a strong sense of community and tradition; staff, pupils and parents, past and present have a great affinity with the school. The enrolment of the school has fluctuated in recent years and currently stands at 188; the majority of the children come from the surrounding area. Approximately 22% of the children are entitled to receive free school meals.

1.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the completion of confidential questionnaires by the parents, a meeting with a group of the children in year 6 and with representatives from the Board of Governors (BoG). Approximately one-third of the questionnaires issued were returned to the Department of Education (DE); a quarter of these contained additional written comments. The responses from the questionnaires indicated that the parents have strong support for the school and value its distinctive ethos. The BoG expressed their high regard for the quality of the education and the care provided for the children. The few matters raised by a small number of the parents were discussed with the BoG and with the Principal. The children indicated that they feel happy and safe in the school.

1.3 The inspection focused on the quality of the work in English and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching in English, the provision for special educational needs (SEN), and on the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 A very positive ethos permeates the life and work of the school. The children are friendly, co-operative and interested in their learning; they displayed exemplary standards of behaviour during the inspection. They are keen to learn, listen well, co-operate with one another and respond readily to the teachers. Relationships at all levels are very good. The staff promote a calm, purposeful atmosphere, which develops effectively the children's confidence and self-esteem. The teachers work hard to create an attractive learning environment in the classrooms and corridors; the bright displays throughout the school celebrate the children's work and record their activities and achievements.

2.2 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has many sound features. Attention is given to the development and implementation of programmes, particularly to healthy snacks, access to drinking water and physical activity, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles. The children demonstrate a good understanding of the importance of making healthy choices. There is a developing commitment to promoting healthy eating and many opportunities are provided for all the children to participate in a range of physical activities.

2.3 The children's experiences are enriched through a variety of extra-curricular activities which include music and sporting activities. In addition, their learning and social development are enhanced through regular visits to places of educational interest and visitors to the school. The recently formed Student Council ensures the children make a valuable input to the life and work of the school; their views and opinions on a range of issues are

sought and valued. Links have been established with other schools, both locally and internationally, through the Schools Community Relations Programme and through the Comenius programme. The school contributes to selected charities and an appropriate emphasis is placed on the importance of caring for others in the wider community.

2.4 The quality of pastoral care is very good; the Principal and the staff are dedicated to the children in their care. Concern for the children's safety and well-being, their learning, and their personal and social development pervades the life and work of the school. The staff have prepared a good range of policies to guide the pastoral provision in the school. The procedures and guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars in relation to child protection are implemented fully.

2.5 There are very good links with the parents and the local community. The parents are welcomed into the school and are encouraged to play an active and supporting role in the education of their children and in the life of the school. The views of the parents are sought systematically and taken into account when the school reviews its curriculum, organisation and provision. The school maintains regular and effective communication with the parents through, for example the monthly newsletter which informs them about school events and arrangements that affect their children. The recently formed Parent Teacher Association has raised significant additional funds on behalf of the school. Formal meetings are provided for parents to meet with the teachers to discuss their children's progress and written reports are issued each year. Valuable links have been established with feeder pre-school settings and with the post-primary schools to which the children transfer.

2.6 The teachers are conscientious in their planning for lessons. The planning identifies clearly the intended learning and is used effectively to guide the teachers in their day-to-day work with the children. During the inspection the quality of teaching observed ranged from satisfactory to excellent. The majority of the lessons had major strengths, and in approximately 30% of them, the teaching was excellent. In this best practice, a wide variety of approaches was employed effectively and resources used creatively. Teachers' questioning was used skilfully to check the children's understanding and extend their thinking. The intended learning was shared with the children at the start of a lesson and time was set aside at the end for discussion to assess how well these had been achieved. Purposeful activities were matched well to the range of the abilities of the children, and the lessons paced effectively. The children were enthusiastic, engaged, and challenged and they had good opportunities to work independently or in small groups.

2.7 A major area of development in the school has been a recent review of the literacy programme which included a whole-school audit and a staff questionnaire. The findings indicated a wide variation in the standards of attainment in English. Good work has been done to date to develop literacy skills across the curriculum; new resources to support the teaching of English have been acquired and these have helped to extend the range of experiences provided for the children. The staff have made effective use of the support provided by the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) to prepare a comprehensive action plan for the development of literacy across the school.

2.8 In all of the lessons visited, the teachers provided good opportunities for the children to listen and to respond orally. In general, the teachers use these opportunities effectively; the contexts are varied and the teachers' questions are often open-ended. In the best practice, sufficient time is given to enable the children to give considered responses. Paired and group work activities provided the children with opportunities to co-operate and to be supportive of one another.

2.9 The teachers plan systematically for the teaching of reading. Good use is made of Big Books, the recently acquired core reading scheme and a phonics programme to promote engagement with text and the enjoyment of reading. The children are presented with a wide range of texts including fiction, non-fiction and poetry which link effectively with curricular themes and topics. As they progress through the school the children become increasingly capable of commenting on the important features of books. They have regular opportunities to read for pleasure, research and personal interest. Reading partnership schemes are promoted to encourage and improve the children's reading standards and attitudes. The staff create a stimulating environment for English, and effective use is made of the central and class libraries.

2.10 The development of the children's writing is well integrated with the other aspects of the English curriculum and examples of their writing from across the curriculum are attractively displayed in the classrooms and the corridors. The teachers are aware of the importance of the appropriate use of ICT to support their teaching and to enhance the children's learning in English. They are enthusiastic about incorporating the use of ICT to support and stimulate effectively the children's interest in writing. In key stage (KS) 1 the talking, listening and reading activities are developed appropriately into tasks such as illustration, labelling, sequencing, sentence construction and simple story writing. The older children engage in writing in a wide range of formats and are encouraged to consider different writing styles and to become increasingly aware of the audience for their writing. The quality of some of the children's poetry and personal writing is very good and reflects vivid imagination and logical ordering of thoughts and ideas. As they progress through the school, the children become increasingly competent and confident in the use of computers; they often compose work directly on screen, and use the computer to draft and re-draft their work. The children have opportunities to enter a range of literacy competitions and have been successful on a number of occasions; their literary experiences are enhanced further by guest authors and poets who visit the school.

2.11 The staff use a range of standardised data to assess the standards achieved by the children in English. There is a need to monitor this aspect of the work further in order to track clearly the progress made by the children and ensure the teaching meets the needs of all the children.

2.12 The children in the year one and two classes 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. The children in years 3 and 4 also experience regular sessions of activity-based learning which enable them to explore and consolidate aspects of their learning through a range of practical activities. In the lessons observed, the children appeared confident in their work and showed a high level of independence, creative ability and enjoyment. The staff are developing aspects of the programme throughout years 1 to 4 and have identified appropriate aspects of the provision for improvement.

2.13 Special educational needs is given a high priority within the school and significant resources have been allocated to the provision. A policy which guides the SEN programme has recently been devised with the help of the SELB CASS. The school has identified approximately one-third of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. The children's learning needs are identified at an early stage through a combination of observation and the use of standardised and diagnostic tests. The teachers compile appropriate education plans which identify strategies and targets to promote improvement. The teachers assess regularly the improvements made by each child; these are reviewed with the parents.

2.14 Under the recently appointed special educational needs co-ordinator's leadership, one full-time teacher works as a learning support teacher to provide help for those children who experience learning difficulties in English. There is currently no additional support for the children who experience difficulties in mathematics. The teaching takes place for the most part in withdrawal sessions and is carried out in a supportive atmosphere. The school is aware already of the need to evaluate effectively the extent to which its SEN arrangements lead to improvements in the standards achieved by the children. A small number of children receive further assistance through the outreach and peripatetic support programme provided by the SELB. Appropriate links are maintained with the parents and with external support agencies.

2.15 The Principal is in his second year in post; in that time, he has been instrumental in overseeing many important and positive changes. He is dedicated and committed to the life and work of the school and to the well-being of the children; he has a very good knowledge and understanding of its context and knows the children and their families well. He builds well on the good relationships established with the parents, with the staff and with the children to promote a positive ethos. He enjoys the support of the local community and is supported effectively by the Vice-principal and the staff.

2.16 The School Development Plan (SDP) is currently in draft form; it is based on consultation with the staff and the BoG and sets priorities for the development of a range of important issues. The SDP should now be aligned with The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and focus on clear strategies to monitor and evaluate the learning and teaching across the school. It would be opportune for the school to consider adjusting the SDP to take account of the areas identified by this inspection for further improvement. The Principal is well placed to set a clear, strategic direction to the work and development of the school.

2.17 There is a collegial approach to the development and improvement of learning and teaching. The teachers support one another well; they discuss and share information to identify effective practice and to develop whole-school approaches. The current staff development programmes provides good opportunities for the staff to keep up-to-date with current trends and developments in education. The role of the curriculum co-ordinators needs, however, to be more clearly defined to assist them in developing further the work of the school.

2.18 The school has a wide range of assessment data; it is timely that this is being used more effectively to identify performance trends and set appropriate targets for improving the standards achieved by all the children. The teachers mark the children's work regularly, often with encouraging and supportive comments. In the best practice, the written marking frequently incorporates useful comments which indicate to the children how their work might be improved.

2.19 The quality of the accommodation is satisfactory. The staff make very good use of the available space. The quality of the cleaning and caretaking is very good.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the very positive ethos and the good quality of the provision for pastoral care;
- the exemplary standards of behaviour of the children and their positive attitudes to learning;
- the very good relationships at all levels in the school and the developing collegiality among the staff;
- the very good quality of the majority of the teaching, including the excellent teaching in approximately a third of the lessons seen;
- the consistently good quality of the teachers' planning;
- the effective use of ICT to enhance the children's learning;
- the commitment and dedication of the Principal to the future development of the school;
- the wide range of extra-curricular activities which enhances the children's learning;
- the hard-working Vice-principal and staff who are committed to the well-being of the children; and
- the support of the parents and the BoG for the life and work of the school.

3.2 The areas for improvement include the need to:

- set in place appropriate strategies in order to monitor and evaluate effectively the quality of the learning and teaching and the standards attained by the children;
- develop further the curricular leadership roles and responsibilities of the staff.

In the area 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.

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

APPENDIX

ACCOMMODATION AND HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

The main issues requiring attention are as follows:

- the car-parking arrangements at the front of the school are inadequate;
- the playground surface is uneven and prone to flooding due to blocked drains.

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