

# **St Columba's NS**

## **Our Self-Evaluation Report and Improvement Plan 2022-23**

### **1.0 Introduction**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 all schools and educational facilities in Ireland were instructed to close at the end of their working day as an action to stem the spread of Covid-19 in the country. Although there had been discussions about a possible shut down in the media, the sudden closure on a Thursday came as a shock to all in the education community. At St Columba's NS the staff had been aware of the possible closure in the days before the announcement, so discussions had happened regarding what solutions could be put in place to try to make some educational provision for our students. Staff members had ensured that they had a stock of 'emergency' materials which would be easily accessed in the event of a closure and consideration had been given to how we might proceed if and when an announcement was made.

The notice to schools of closure could not have been more sudden when it came through an announcement by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, to the gathered media in New York. This was at around 11 o'clock on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March and was then reported on the radio. Fortunately for the St Columba's staff and students, our secretary, who was working in her office, got the news and at 11.20, she arrived at Mrs Creaner's door to inform her of the news. It was important not to create upset or anxiety among the children, so the SNA team went from class to class to let the teaching staff know the situation. Meanwhile texts and email were sent to parents/guardians letting them know the situation. By midday the children were sent out to play while the staff who were not on yard duty began the task of gathering materials to be sent home at 1.10 for the Junior children and 2.10 for the rest of the school. The children left the school on that Thursday afternoon carrying their school lives like pack horses. This closure was announced as a two-week firebreak, although those in education believed that it would actually last the three weeks until the date of the two week Easter holidays, thus giving full five weeks for everything to return to normal. No one in schools could have anticipated that the school closures would extend to the rest of the school year.

The second lock down was in many ways even more surprising as the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, had insisted that school would reopen after the Christmas break of 2020/21. For some in our school community this was less traumatic in that there were mechanisms and resources available which had not been so readily accessible at the time of the first lockdown, however, for others this second period was more stressful as it seemed that this challenging situation was never going to end.

This report is a review of the school response to an unprecedented situation, an evaluation of the impact on the children, staff and the whole wider school community and an assessment of how the school can respond to the immediate effects of the Covid-19 period. In addition, this review will consider what might be put in place to support the school community in the event of any further school closures due to any adverse circumstances.

### **1.1 The focus of this evaluation**

The primary focus of the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) was to consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our school community and in particular the impact of the two long school closures on important areas of school life. Below are the principal areas discussed on the day of the evaluation:

- General impact on the whole school community
- Impact on Well-being in our school (Students and staff)
- Impact on academic attainment in our school
- Impact on the behaviour of our children
- Impact on mental health of the whole school community (anxiety, school refusal, social integration, stress)

- Impact on the relationship and communication with parents
- Processes and procedures which were introduced due to Covid-19 restrictions and directives.

## 2.0 Gathering Evidence

We gathered evidence from a number of primary sources:

- Surveys of children, staff and parents/guardians
- Standardized test results
- Staff assessment
- Direct teacher engagement with parents/guardians

## 3.0 Negative Effects of Covid-19 closures and responses

Here we review the negative consequences of the closure of the school and the various requirements on school life due to Covid-19 mitigation.

- Junior class students (Junior Infants through 1<sup>st</sup> class) missed out on much of their ECCE time and so were less school ready in the following area identified by staff.
  1. Independence (organisation of coats, lunches, toileting)
  2. Social skills (communication with other children and staff)
  3. Emotional resilience (separation anxiety relating to start of school, during the day and in social interactions)
  4. Self-regulation (Greater need for adult support, turn taking, sharing)
  5. Anxiety (general anxiety which can manifest in poor sleep patterns, quicker to get upset in life situations, tearfulness and clinginess)
- Communication challenges both during lockdown and during heightened restrictions.
  1. Difficulties finding a balance between the number of communications by text and email between staff and parents/guardians. A wide range of expectations existed between families who would have been able to facilitate full day on-line tuition and those who could not engage for a variety of reasons. Many staff members engaged with students and parents out-side of regular school contact hours to facilitate our families.
  2. Social distance restrictions result in parents/guardians being unable to pop into classroom or engage with staff as easily. Emails are helpful, but can be unnecessarily formal and cannot compare with an immediate face to face discussion.
  3. Lack of adequate ICT equipment or broadband in many of our households, including staff members, which made arranging online sessions challenging.
  4. Family circumstance where parents were trying to work and support their children.
- Educational challenges
  1. In-class teaching allows teachers to support individual students in an unobtrusive and sensitive way where a moment explaining a task or concept directly can save a lot of stress. This was particularly obvious in the area of maths.
  2. Volume of work is normally tailored in-class by teacher to differentiate for the needs of each child. While the work sent out to families was to be considered a menu, it was difficult for some parents, who are not teachers, to measure what their child should be achieving.
  3. Choosing appropriate work which would be accessible to children working independently at home was challenging for staff.

4. Assessment of work was difficult for staff as often they did not see the work produced by students.
  5. Introducing new concepts was very challenging when the capacity to assess learning and understanding was so difficult.
  6. Loss of a number of group activities such as sports, scouts, music lessons, particularly as these restrictions remained in place long after the schools reopened. Many of the fun activities such as singing, class mixed art, sports and reading activities were impossible due to rules around classes and pods.
  7. Wearing of masks during school time once the school reopened was challenging since those who work with children will often communicate using a wide variety of silent communications apart from the spoken word.
- Emotional and behavioural challenges
    1. The impact of restricted social interaction for children during on-line schooling cannot be over-estimated and the consequences will need attention for a long time to come.
    2. As listed above, the impact on our younger children may be obvious, the older children have struggled to express their anxiety and feelings during and since the lock down.
    3. Very clear boundaries had to be created during on-line teaching and learning. This may have had an impact on teacher/student relationships from time to time.
    4. On return to school, many children struggled with class and yard rules, interpersonal relationships, group dynamics which had not been a feature of their home lives.
  - Burn out
    1. Many children suffered from exhaustion and burn out as they worked through educational tasks without the support of their teacher all day and the camaraderie of their classmates.
    2. Parents/Guardians deserve a huge amount of credit for taking on the support of their children's learning during lockdown, however, this has to have had a major impact on their lives. For some this is a continuing issue as they juggle the elements of work, home, childcare etc.
    3. The staff found the experience of on-line schooling very challenging. Trying to meet the individual needs, not only of the children in their care, but the logistical needs of their families left the staff very tired. Staff members did not just work during the on-line group sessions, but a lot of outside of hours work preparing materials which would be accessible to students, finding options to cover as much of the curriculum as possible, engaging with individual students and communicating by email and phone with parents and other agencies.

#### **4.0 Positive effects of Covid-19 closures and the response to this situation.**

While the positive effects of the Covid-19 closures may be very few and far between it is important to acknowledge that there were some good things discovered, learned and implemented during and following from the Covid-19 restrictions.

- Enhanced communication: This seems to be a contradiction of the fact that there were huge communication challenges during Covid-19, however, there were elements of learning and improvement which occurred.
  1. Email communication and the use of text allows rapid communication between staff and parents/guardians regarding the life of the school and also when arranging appointments.
  2. The introduction of Zoom as a group communications platform has allowed classes to work together, even when apart. Services were broadcast around the world, which saw people joining us from as far away as Cape town and Toronto.

3. While the pop in chat is still possible, email to arrange an appointment allows for greater privacy for parents and staff wishing to discuss their child.
  4. The school newsletter allowed families to connect while the school was closed.
- External supports: There was some recognition of improved supports for schools from out-side agencies.
    1. Additional funding from government to help with cleaning costs and the provision of hygiene products. It should be recognised that these supports provide a minimum level of cleaning which should happen in a school and should continue in the future.
    2. Publishers generously released on-line access to text-books and resources during closures. This allowed staff to use a greater variety of resources and to explore other resources.
    3. Patron body and in particular the Chairman of the board of management and board members were supportive of the staff and also to some families who requested support.

### **5.0 Actions implemented by the school community during the closure and Covid-19 restrictions.**

These are the actions and processes which happened in response to school closures and restrictions which were imposed on schools due to the global pandemic that was and still is Covid-19. This list is in no particular order but recognises the response of the community at a time of crisis.

- School books sent home on day 1 of the first closure and week 1 of the second closure. This allowed the staff to follow the academic plans as far as possible and to mitigate some of the inevitable learning loss.
- Provision of learning materials as a menu from which families could choose to work at a pace to suit their own situation. The decision to send this on Friday evenings allowed families to work out some kind of schedule and also meant that the materials were with the children when their Zoom class started.
- This moved on to emailed homework which reduced the movement in and out of books and equipment on a day to day basis.
- The Aladdin system which was administered by the school secretary allowed easier communications in bulk and on an individual basis.
- Regular emails between staff and parents/guardians opened-up a line of communication which has continued to be useful.
- Small group teaching allowed every child to be heard. Although it resulted in fewer actual sessions it allowed teachers and SNA's to have a more personal engagement with the children. Additional time slots were available to those who specifically requested it and many children availed of this on a very private basis.
- Engagement by SNA team with children under the SET umbrella was done using Zoom or other platforms. This allowed additional support to those who requested it.
- SNA team supported infants reading programme by working with individuals and small groups to allow regular practice.
- The challenge of lack of ICT kit in some households was supported by loaning tablets to those families who responded to the offer and staff either delivered or gave these out from the school.
- On-line meetings with parents were held on a private request basis to support the learning and well-being of their children.
- Activities out-side of regular academic curricular activities were sourced and recommended to families. These ranged from PE activities which could be played in the park or the back yard to on-line visits to art galleries, museums, and interactive spaces.

- On-line resources such as the Panto, writing workshops, art, science and history workshops and engagement with out-side agencies such as the European Council, Junior Achievement and various cultural agencies were developed and put into use.
- A greater emphasis on hand hygiene has been encouraged around the school.
- An emphasis on well-being has been beneficial to the staff, student and parents in our community.

## **6.0 Our improvement plan.**

What we have learned from our experience during the period of Covid-19 restrictions. Things we would like to retain from that time on an ongoing basis. Things we would change or drop, both from pre-covid time and from Covid-19 onwards

- **Hygiene and handwashing:** While we always viewed good hygiene practices as important the value of non-transmission has been proven by the lack of direct contagion of Covid-19 in our school community. Good practice includes regular washing, drying with your own cloth (5 face cloths for €3 in IKEA) and the use of sanitizer, particularly in the colds and influenza times are practices worth keeping in the school.
- **Emergency folders:** Each teacher has an emergency folder to ensure that there is appropriate and accessible work available to their class in the event of absence or closure.
- **The Good Manners Challenge:** An initiative to encourage kindness, good manners and respect in the school has proven to be a huge success in the school. A simple positive reinforcement for all children. This is definitely staying.
- **Weaving Wellbeing/Welcome to Wellbeing:** A programme to encourage positive thinking and resilience in the school, this is rolled out to every class and opens up conversations about self-worth and just being yourself. A winner here.
- **Focus on literacy and numeracy:** After the schools reopened in September of 2020 an instruction came from the Dept of Education that schools should focus on core literacy and numeracy skills and Wellbeing through SPHE programmes. This has worked well and our scores on standardized tests show that there has been a recovery in our score levels to indicate that this has worked well. The SET team engaged in a concerted campaign of in-class team teaching and this will continue to be the case. It is now time to expand this work with greater integration of literacy and numeracy into other curriculum areas in line with the National Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)
- **Oral Irish suffered during lock down,** so at the recent review of PLC there is a plan to emphasise this area of the language and to follow the themes of the infants Aistear programme. The whole school community can assist in this through using their 'Cúpla Focail' when the opportunity arises.
- **Drama and Music also suffered as singing indoors was banned for a while after reopening.** The use of music as a curricular activity and an aid to learning is returning to our school.

## **7.0 Conclusion:**

The sudden closures of March 2020 and January 2021 have had an impact on all schools. The children, staff, parents and board of management of St Columba's NS community did their best in difficult times and while actions may not all have had the desired effect or had all of the benefits for which the school community hoped, as a community St Columba's did it's best to ride out the storm together.

## Our Improvement Plan

<b>Targets</b>	<b>Actions</b>	<b>Persons / groups responsible</b>	<b>Criteria for success</b>	<b>Progress and adjustments</b>	<b>Targets achieved</b>
Feabhas a cur ar Gaeilge ó bhéal tríd an scoil.	Ceangail idir téamaí in Aistir sna bhun ranganna agus na téamaí I nGaeilge ó bhéal sna ranganna eile.	Gach múinteoir sa scoil, go háraithe na múinteoirí sna ranganna naonáin na téamaí a cur in iúil don foireann go léir.	Suim agus líofacht na gaeilge ag feabhsú sna ranganna go léir.	Áthbreithnú ag deireadh na scoil bliana 2022/23. An bhfuil treoracha nó áiseann breise ag teastáil.	Páistí ag déanamh iarracht gaeilge a labhairt go toilteanach agus gan eagla.
Hygiene and handwashing	Continued focus on good hand hygiene practices and school cleaning as far as possible.	Class teachers and SNA for hands. Cleaners and staff for cleaning and monitoring of cleaning.	Good practice by school community and a clean school.	Constant monitoring.	Clean hands and a clean school.
Expansion of the literacy / language programme into other curricular areas through the development of 'disciplinary' language in areas such as History, Geography and Science.	In planning, teachers should be aware of including 'disciplinary' language in their classes to expand and develop the vocabulary in use in the school.	Class teachers will plan for expanded vocabulary and SEN team will assist during in-class team teaching and in work with children with specific support needs. Where appropriate, SNA staff will contribute to this planning and implementation.	That children will comfortably use the expanded vocabulary in the appropriate context.	Class teachers will monitor the progress of their class and where possible communicate with the whole school the progress in vocabulary expansion in various disciplinary areas.	This is an open-ended target as the vocabulary should continue to expand year on year.
SET in-class intervention / team teaching has proven to be very valuable and this approach will continue as a methodology in the school.	SET team and class teachers will plan together to optimise the outcomes of this approach.	SET Team will timetable in-class intervention following plan initiated by class teachers in literacy and numeracy.	Improved engagement with the curriculum, particularly in Literacy and Numeracy by all children. Consistency and improvement in standardized test scores.	Review as part of roll out of literacy curriculum.	Open ended targets apart from test results and teacher observation.
Continued emphasis on Well-being through the SPHE curriculum and various programmes.	Roll out of Weaving Wellbeing / Welcome to Wellbeing programmes.	All class teachers	Improvement in resilience, self-esteem and confidence through the school.	Teacher and parental input and observation.	Completion of programmes with signs of development of self-worth and respect throughout the school.