

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

**Assessment of Education
in places other than Recognised Schools**

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

Kilkenny Steiner School

Address

Ballytobin, Callan, Co. Kilkenny, R95 ATK7.

**Name of Principal/Director
Administrator- on the report**

Bee Verheyden

Name of Assessor/s

Lisa Duffy
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

28th May 2024

Date of Final Report

28th February 2024

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	09:15		
Closing time:	Varies depending on day and class.		
Main breaks during the day:	11:00	to	11:45
	13:00	to	13:45

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes	
00/00/0000	

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

1.2. Name(s) of principal and/or other teacher(s) interviewed

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Bee Verheyden and another staff member.

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

This assessment report is based on the following sources of evidence:

- Information furnished on the R2 form
- An interview with the administrator and the teachers' adviser
- Classroom visits
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the pupils
- Observation of the educational materials in use
- Information contained on the school website www.kilkennysteinerschool.ie

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Kilkenny Steiner School, is an independent, co-educational, non-denominational school, catering for pupils from age four to twelve. The school evolved from the previously established Steiner School in Camphill Community Ballytobin, when a group of parents, looking for an alternative approach to mainstream education, founded an independent school inspired by the Steiner-Waldorf approach to education. The curriculum delivered in the school is grounded in the principles of this model of education and as stated on the school website, *“we embrace holistic learning, rooted in nature and community, where every child’s unique potential is cherished and cultivated”*.

The school serves pupils from both the national and international community, with some families moving to the area specifically to attend the school. Some of the children have attended the Steiner kindergarten in Ballyhall prior to enrolling in the school.

The school is governed by Ballyhall Kindergarten LTD. A Board of Management, consisting of five members, is in place. A teacher, the administrator and the teachers’ adviser also play a supportive or advisory role on the board. Formal meetings are held approximately once per month. The curriculum, together with the methodologies used to deliver the education provision, are overseen by the college of teachers, who meet on a weekly basis. The school is registered as a charity.

Building a strong school community is a key feature in Steiner education and the school is run through the co-operation between parents and teachers. Parents are encouraged to become involved in all aspects of school life, and often volunteer their unique skillset to sit on “circles”, such as the finance circle, maintenance circle, fundraising circle or on the recently established focus group. They also may teach special interest subjects, and it is believed that the positive support of parents and the active participation of the whole school community enriches the educational experience for all. Parents, pupils and teachers also come together regularly to celebrate various seasonal festivals throughout the year. The school holds parents’ evening meetings three times per year and there are also two Open Days per year. Open communication is a key strength in the school, and parents receive updates via email, WhatsApp or newsletter.

The school community actively support new families joining the school. Upon acceptance of enrolment, parents receive a School Handbook and new families are paired up with a welcoming family, who offer assistance if so required.

The school adopts a *gentle head, heart and hands* approach to education. The mission of the school, as stated on their website is to *“Receive the child with reverence, Educate with love, Relinquish in freedom”*. Students are encouraged to pursue their interests with enthusiasm, developing a lifelong love of self-motivated learning.

For the purposes of registration, there are currently 32 pupils age 6 and over enrolled in the school. The capacity of the school is capped at 60.

The school is a member of the newly founded Irish Waldorf Education Association. This association hopes to provide advisory and mentoring services to member schools, which includes both Department of Education recognised schools and Independent Schools. The association also offers opportunities for teachers to partake in professional development or to connect with other teachers and share educational resources.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

Staffing at the school consists of five full time staff members and six support teachers. The collegial running of schools is an integral aspect of Steiner education, and there is no named principal or deputy principal. Decisions relating to pedagogy rests with the collegial consensus of the school's core teachers. Each year the school also welcomes European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteers who work closely with teachers, parents and the children.

Staff meetings take place weekly, as do meetings to discuss the running of the school. A system of mentoring new teachers is in place in the school. Teachers engage in continuous professional development, as well as reflective practice, leading to growth and improvement in the school.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

A copy of the school's calendar for the current school year was provided with the R2 application. Children arrive from 09:00, with the school day officially beginning at 09:15. Children in the Féileacáin class, as well as class 1 students finish at 13:00 every day. Students in class 2 finish at 15:00 two days per week, and at 13:00 three days per week. School finishes at 15:00 for all other students from Monday to Thursday and at 13:00 on Friday. After school care is available from Monday to Thursday until 15:00.

Students receive a 45-minute mid-morning break if staying until 13:00 and an additional 45-minute lunch break if staying until 15:00.

The school is in operation for 182 days per academic year.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The school consists of three separate buildings, built around a central courtyard. These buildings house the four classrooms, an office, a large library, and a learning support room. Students have access to a large outdoor space, complete with lots of outdoor play equipment, a playing field, an orchard and a small woodland area. If the opportunity presents there are hopes to purchase an adjacent property which would greatly expand the accommodation available to the school.

Pupils are taught in multi grade classrooms, with two grade levels taught in each room. The classrooms are filled with natural and child-created materials, as is integral to the Waldorf philosophy. While some textbooks are in use, children usually make their own textbooks based on collaborative learning with their teacher. There is minimal exposure to technology in the primary school learning environment.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

The provision is based on the Steiner approach to education. As stated on the school website *“With an approach rooted firmly in the educational principles of Rudolf Steiner, we aim to ignite a life-long love of learning by fostering the child’s natural curiosity for the world around them, and inspiring their innate love, connection, and respect for nature. We aim to create an unhurried, holistic, and creative learning environment where we address the whole child in thinking, feeling, and doing. Cultivating physical wellbeing, a rich inner life, creativity, and joy in learning”*.

The curriculum consists of a flexible set of pedagogical guidelines, founded on Steiner’s principles. It takes account of the holistic development of the child and gives equal attention to the physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs of each individual pupil. It is designed to work in harmony with the different phases of the child’s development.

The core subjects of the curriculum are taught in thematic blocks, or “main lessons”, and all lessons include a balance of artistic activity, the development of practical skills and the learning of academic content.

6.1. General information

As stated on the school website, the mission of the school is to *“Receive the child with reverence, Educate with love, Relinquish in freedom”*. The school day begins with a rhythmic activity, such as song singing or movement. Learning in the Féileacáin class takes the form of imaginative play, story, song and rhyme, and children are encouraged to actively explore the world around them. This approach to early learning prepares children for more formal learning in class 1 and 2.

From this class upwards, the ‘Main Lesson’ commences around 10:00 and usually lasts for approximately one hour. In this lesson a single theme is studied in depth by the class for a number of weeks. Artistic and creative approaches are used, and creativity is integrated with academic learning. In this lesson a topic is explored from many and varied perspectives. As children move up through the school, their work progresses in line with their stage of development. Parents are encouraged to work closely with the school, meeting several times throughout the year to support their child’s education by participating in seasonal celebrations, fund raising events or attending parent teacher meetings.

A whole school assembly led by a different teacher each week, takes place each Friday and this helps foster a sense of community within the school.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

Pupils engage in pre and early reading and writing activities prior to approximately age seven, laying the foundations for the more formal development of literacy skills from class 1 onwards.

This is achieved through the use of stories, rhymes, painting, drama and the exploration of the world around them. In class 1, letters are gradually introduced through the illustrations of the stories pupils

hear, with capital letters learned before lower case letters. As pupils progress, the stimulus for writing comes from the main lesson. Grammatical skills are developed as pupils progress through the school. Cursive writing is introduced in class 3 and class 4. By senior level, pupils engage in writing a variety of genres, including poetry writing, letter writing, essay writing and writing short plays.

Reading is initially approached using a language experience approach, with children reading from their own written books inspired by the main lesson. These books provide a clear record of learning and individual ability across all learning areas. Gradually, pupils progress to reading printed texts.

Oral language skills are developed throughout the school. Clear enunciation is modelled by the teachers. The recitation of rhymes and poems, the retelling of stories, myths and legends and participation in drama activities, assist the development of pupils' oral language skills.

6.3. Numeracy

The formal acquisition of numeracy skills is not pursued before the age of seven, although the foundations for acquiring these skills are established in the féileacáin class. At this stage, basic counting skills are developed through the use of story, song and rhymes. By class 1, pupils have been introduced to the four basic number operations. Pupils use manipulatives prior to moving on to pictorial representation and finally on to the abstract representation of mathematical concepts. Mental maths and problem-solving activities are included in the provision.

6.4. Irish

The development of language skills is very important in Steiner/ Waldorf education. A part time specialist teacher of Irish teaches all classes twice per week. Oral language, reading, writing and grammar skills are developed, and teachers aim for children to experience the language as a living language. *Bua na Cainte* is used to support learning in senior classes, and aspects of Irish culture are integrated into the lessons whenever possible.

Children attending an Independent School should be afforded opportunity for the study of Irish, however the study of Irish is not a requirement for registration under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Where Irish is included in the provision, an Independent School may identify students attending that they consider would qualify for an exemption from the study of Irish. Independent Schools can make decisions in consultation with parents regarding arrangements for these children. Any arrangements made in relation to the study of Irish does not entitle students to an exemption from the study of Irish in the event of a subsequent enrolment at a Department of Education recognised school.

Parents of children attending an Independent School should be informed of and acquaint themselves with implications of not taking Irish and/or having a second language. Parents seeking information should consult with the Department of Education www.education.ie and/or the State Examinations Commission www.examinations.ie with regard to the requirement for Irish and/or an additional language.

6.5. Other areas of learning

As stated on the website www.kilkennysteinerschool.ie, the school adopts a gentle head, heart and hands approach to education. According to the Steiner philosophy, children learn best when their creativity and imagination are inspired so lots of music, art, and crafts are incorporated into the curriculum. Rather than dividing knowledge into separate distinct subject areas, learning is multi-sensory and utilises multiple approaches to learning. The core subjects, including history, geography and science form part of the main lesson. Artistic activities, as well as physical and rhythmic activities, are included throughout the day, with movement exercises taking place before the Main Lesson. Weekly games lessons are timetabled, and pupils are encouraged to be physically active during break times.

The use of drawing, painting, craft work and handwork, music, modelling and drama are at the heart of the learning experience and the development of creative, as well as academic skills, are highly valued. Pupils avail of opportunities to engage in one off workshops or art events taking place in the locality. The celebration of festivals from all over the world enhances pupils' learning experiences. For example, the Harvest Festival and Michaelmas are celebrated at the end of September, with members of the school community gathering together to enjoy the fruits of the harvest. By the end of primary school, pupils will have experienced myths, legends and stories from a diverse range of cultures and eras including Native American, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Norse tales and stories from medieval times and the Old Testament.

Younger children learn science through their interactions with the world around them. Natural history and biology begin in class four and five through the study of the animal and plant kingdoms. A large polytunnel is erected in the grounds and pupils partake in gardening classes. Learning in the outdoor environment and field trips support classroom-based learning.

Social, personal and health education (SPHE) permeates the school day and is learned through the daily interactions between teachers, students and the wider school community. An adapted version of the Stay Safe programme is implemented in each class.

Pupils have timetabled classes in Italian and German and learn the basics in these languages during their time in Kilkenny Steiner School.

6.6. Special educational needs

The focus on creative engagement with lesson materials allows all learners, regardless of ability, to work at different levels within their class group. Two volunteers are available to help facilitate the education of pupils with special educational needs, and to give additional support to those who need it. This support may take the form of in class support or withdrawal. From September 2024, it is envisaged that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) will be drawn up to help identify how best the school can support children who require additional support.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Summative assessment is not valued in Steiner education. The emphasis in the school is on the individual development of the child. Teacher observation is key to informally assessing pupils' progress and each teacher keeps records, noting the progress and needs of the children in their care. Whenever possible, the same teacher works with the class for six years and can support the child's individual needs over time. It has recently been decided to standardise record keeping within the school, and there are plans to introduce a standard form, to record pupil progress at each level. Parent teacher meetings take place at least once per year, or more often, if so required. A written report is issued once per year.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Many of the school's policies have recently been reviewed or re-drafted, and others are currently under review. All staff members have been Garda vetted and have been trained in the implementation of Children First. All staff have completed the child safeguarding training and first aid training. There is an appointed Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDL), with notices displayed as required.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

Pupils attending Kilkenny Steiner School are in receipt of an education, intellectual, physical, moral, and social that meets requirements for Section 14 Registration for pupils attending the school. Aspects of the provision that are successful include:

- The commendable role played by the parent body, providing invaluable support to the school and its community.
- Strong communication is a key strength of the school.
- The administrator and teachers' adviser, who were interviewed during the assessment, demonstrated a strong commitment to the school and to the ideals of Steiner/ Waldorf education and conscientiously carry out a range of duties.
- The spirit of inclusivity which is evident in the school and its wider community.
- The suitability, flexibility and creativity of the curriculum provided in relation to the ages, abilities and interests of the pupils.
- The learning environment, which consists of the outdoor natural environment, as well as spacious, warm and comfortable classrooms.

- Staff engage in reflective practice, striving to continually improve the educational experience for all.
- The policy of decision-making and resolving of issues through consensus.

The findings of the assessment were discussed with the participants on the date of the assessment. The participants were advised that the decision regarding registration would be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).

Following the assessment, a draft report is provided to the principal, along with a Factual Accuracy and Feedback Form, which may be submitted within a specified timeframe, in response to the content of the draft report. The report, along with any information provided on the feedback form for consideration, is brought to the AEARS Registration Panel. The Registration Panel make decisions regarding registration of children in receipt of the education at the Independent School.

Section 10 Discussion of Finding of Report with Principal

The report was discussed with the administrator and teachers' adviser, at the conclusion of the visit on the 28 May 2024. It was stated that the recommendation would be to register the pupils of Kilkenny Steiner School on the register. The final decision regarding registration will be made by the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Panel - Tusla, Child and Family Agency.

Section 11 Outcome

Outcome of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements for Section 14 Registration of Children Attending the School

Following the Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending Kilkenny Steiner School will be registered and retained on the register of children receiving an education in a place other than a recognised school as required by Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

Registration is subject to a periodic review by the Child and Family Agency