

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

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

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

Sligo Sudbury School

Address

Faughts, Dunally, Calry, Co Sligo

Name of Principal/Director

Gayle Nagle (Chairperson of board of Trustees)

Name of Assessor/s

Richard Coughlan, Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

25th January 2023

Date of Final Report

15th June 2023

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	08:30		
Closing time:	16:30		
Main breaks during the day:	00:00	To	00:00
	00:00	To	00:00

Is school in operation for more than five years?

No

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

06/09/2018

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

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Gayle Nagle (Chairperson of Board of Trustees) and one of the school's founders

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

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

- Information furnished in form R2 completed by the chairperson of the Board of Trustees
- An interview with the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees and one of the school's founders
- Observation of educational materials in use
- Viewing of the learning environment, including the learning areas and the surroundings of the school building
- The school website
- School documentation:
 - School calendar
 - Child safeguarding statement and risk assessment
 - Health and safety statement.
 - Chart of school governance (Circles)
 - Exemplar student records
 - Form for members of the school community to bring a matter to the School Meeting
 - A form for dealing with an issue by the Just Chat committee
 - Community Agreements: School Rules and Code of Behaviour
 - Student Handbook

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Sligo Sudbury School opened on 6 September 2018 and since then has grown from 15 students to the present 78 students. In a Sudbury or democratic school, students and staff members are treated almost as equals. The school is run by direct democracy involving students and staff. Each student decides how to spend their time. They learn through their experiences in doing this. For some students, learning in this way can involve following a formal course of study. For others the learning may be less formal. Each student is solely responsible for their education and how they learn.

The school was set up by a small group of parents. Its legal structure is that of a company limited by guarantee (CLG) and it is registered as a charity. It has a board of seven people. The aim of the school is to provide a safe environment for democratic self-directed learning in the Northwest and to facilitate students whose learning style may not necessarily be facilitated by a mainstream school. Parents of students pay a fee, called a membership fee and this is the school's main source of income. Students' ages range from 5 to 18 years. The school is outgrowing its present buildings and there are advanced plans for a new school building adjacent to the present ones.

In a Sudbury school, each student has personal responsibility for their learning, when they will carry out that learning, how they will learn, and where they will learn. Students have control over what they learn and how they are evaluated. They choose their curriculum.

The legal authority in the Sligo Sudbury School is the Board of Trustees. It interacts with the *School Meeting*. The hour-long school meeting takes place twice each week. It manages the school on a day-to-day basis through *Circles* that each have responsibility for part of the functioning of the school. All students and staff are members of the school meeting. It is chaired by a student and, through a formal system of proposals leading to the making of *laws*, or rules, it is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. It maintains and updates as necessary the school's rules and procedures, which are called *Community Agreements: School Rules and Code of Behaviour*. Depending on which items are on the agenda, much of the time the school meeting is attended mainly by staff members. The school meeting secretary, who is usually a staff member, records the minutes.

There are twelve *Circles*, each with responsibility for a particular area in the day-to-day running of the school. Examples of the circles are student welfare, finance, admissions, health and safety. Each circle and the school meeting have students and staff who are appointed to roles that ensure their effective functioning. In the case of the circles, most of the roles are filled by staff members.

Two of the circles are of day-to-day importance for students - the *Morning Circle* and the *Just Chat Circle*. Every morning at 10:30 everyone stands in a circle for about 10 minutes and checks in on what is happening in the school. The morning circle is used for disseminating messages from the school meeting. It provides a base for the school day. Attendance is mandatory. It is chaired by a student, often a younger one.

The *Just Chat* circle is the forum through which any difficulties including intra-student conflict and disciplinary issues are dealt with. It includes students and staff and the people involved in the issue under consideration. It reports to the school meeting. Among the matters brought to the just chat circle are disputes between students. Issues of a student disciplinary nature are brought there also. The ethos of the school is that issues should be resolved where possible outside the just chat circle. The parties to a conflict complete a form that is presented at the circle. The idea is that through

commencing a conversation, the issue can be resolved. Occasionally the just chat circle will recommend a particular outcome and the parties' consent is then required. Parents are rarely involved in disciplinary issues. Care is taken with the language used so that the process is not seen as punitive. The school meeting acts as a monitor of the just chat circle process.

By having responsibility for their education, students get experience of making decisions and dealing with the consequences of their choices. They gain experience and maturity. They are motivated to learn. The successful working of the school is based on that motivation.

The school meets its parents twice each year. Parents also check in with the school from time to time and receive regular correspondence, including a monthly newsletter. The school holds regular support nights for parents. At the end of each term, there is a community party in the school. This includes parents. There are regular school open days.

Parents are active in the day-to-day running of the school, through being given opportunities to volunteer. This includes being invited to volunteer when there is a gap in staffing.

The students are involved in almost all aspects of the running of the school. The school's code of behaviour and its anti-bullying policy are explicitly and implicitly within the remit of one or more of the circles and of the school meeting. Students, through these, have a say in framing both. The *Student Handbook* is a comprehensive resource for students and their parents on all aspects of the school.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

The school does not have a principal. The "person in charge" of the various aspects of running the school is elected democratically by the school community for a term that is usually the school year. Currently the chairperson of the board of trustees is that person.

The school has ten staff members and another person who comes in for one day each week and is available for substitution. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including education. The primary roles of staff members are to guarantee the safety of the students and to be available to support their learning needs. There is a minimum of five staff members on duty at any time. Each staff member comes in for three or four days, except for Wednesday when everybody is on duty. Each staff member has a formal job description. The school's *Staffing Circle* administers staff matters. Following an annual review, the school recruits new staff members to replace staff who are leaving and in response to the learning needs of the students. Both staff and students give their feedback in the review.

As well as the work of its staff, the students benefit from other people and organisations who are invited into the school. They span a range of areas of activity. For example, the school is involved in *Music Generation*, which was set up to ensure that everyone, whatever their background, gets access to music tuition.

The school uses its IT to provide students with access to online education applications including, *Khan Academy*, *Duolingo*, and courses and classes on *skillshare.com*. The subscriptions to these and to other educational software is in response to student requests.

The safety and welfare of students is at the core of the school's activities. Students sign in every morning. There is a high attendance rate. The school has a child safeguarding statement and has appointed a designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person. It has carried out a risk assessment and has listed the risks together with the school's procedures for addressing the risks. The school would welcome the opportunity to participate in Tusla training for these roles.

Following the purchase of more land, the school is at an advanced stage of planning for a new building that will accommodate an expansion to 150-180 students. This will include a sports hall and pitches. The project is expected to be completed in time for the 2024-2025 school year.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school is open from 08:30 to 16:30. The core time during which all of the students are present is from 10:30 to 14:30. Most students arrive between 09:00 and 10:00 and are collected between 15:00 and 16:00. The purpose of having flexible school hours is to support working parents and to meet students' varied needs. The school is open for 174 days each year and has similar holiday periods to those of mainstream schools.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

Sligo Sudbury School is situated in the countryside near Sligo. It is located on a partially wooded site. Its main building was formerly a national school. There are ample outdoor playing areas.

In the main building are several areas where students can work and play. The base for students is a room where each student has a place to store their possessions. The main school noticeboard is there. A very large room, called the games room is used by students for play and for learning. Other rooms are the music room, an art room, and a "quiet room" that is equipped with a computer. The school has a small library. A student was studying English there when we visited. The kitchen is where students and staff prepare food and eat together. Students can learn there about cooking and baking. A student must obtain a certificate in order to be allowed use of the kitchen. Beside the kitchen is the school office. Opposite the kitchen, is the room where school meetings are held.

The grounds of the school include several playing areas, small buildings, and covered areas. In the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) room some students were working together on a *Turing Tumble*, which is a game where players build mechanical computers powered by marbles to solve logic puzzles. We met a student in the school's *Music Space*, who was a member of one of the school's bands.

The school has a small astroturf pitch, an outdoor room for physical play, outdoor tables and seating, and a large playing field. Other play and learning areas included a tree house, a polytunnel, and a workshop with power tools.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

Through their participation in the school meeting, students learn a range of skills and gain an understanding of how the school functions. A student chairs the school meeting to which the circles report. Students become aware of much of what is happening in the school. They have roles within the school meeting that ensure its smooth and effective running. The roles include disseminating the outcomes of the meeting and locating students whose attendance at the meeting may be necessary. All of these roles are valuable educational opportunities.

The school has 78 students and each of the students has their own curriculum. They are not under pressure to do anything in particular. Rather the expectation is that they will discover and pursue what interests them. Students develop their interests, either on an individual basis or through contact with other students. As these interests develop, the need to pursue them leads them to learning reading and writing and mathematics and other subjects. Students can follow their interests, and through that their education through the formation of clubs, where they learn from each other. For example, the school has a drama club. It also has bands and teams.

The culture of the school influences students. Through it each student is enabled and empowered to be responsible for their learning. The culture continually evolves and changes. The school culture is a continual topic for discussion and review at staff meetings to ensure that it keeps in step with the needs and interests of the students. As well as meeting their own needs and wishes, the needs and wishes of the school community must be accommodated by the student. Through a student managing their needs in the context of the school community, valuable learning continually takes place.

The school is encouraging of its students in developing their interests. It provides resources for this. An individual student's day could involve them, in the first part of the day up to morning circle, studying independently in English or mathematics or as part of a small group. Following morning circle, a student might be involved in sport, or music, or in preparing for a *Gaisce Award*. The school encourages the more senior students to volunteer for roles in the school. Later in the school day, students may play board games or socialise with their peers, or a student may meet with their mentor.

The role of mentor is fundamental to student learning. Each staff member has between six and ten students to mentor. This involves checking in with each student every week or two, or more frequently if required. The discussion involves academic and emotional matters. For example, the mentor may help the student in setting goals, or the student may seek advice on a difficulty they have encountered. When a parent meets the school, the mentor manages the meeting. The student chooses their mentor who changes each year or maybe each term.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

While many of the students begin reading between eight and ten years, some take longer. However, it is the school's experience that by the age of twelve all students are reading equally well. The students learn to read in different way, some using phonics. Students' drive and motivation to learn to write comes from experiencing the need to be able to write. Students' homes have an influence here. However, if something extra is needed by a student, the school will help out.

Once reading and writing have been mastered, they are used as tools by the students in learning and following their interests. Student academic work that involves reading and writing generally takes place in the early part of the day.

6.3. Numeracy

The situation with students learning mathematics is similar to that with reading and writing. It is stimulated by a developing need and an interest that demands the use of numbers or other mathematical concepts. When a student needs help, they ask for it. It is the experience of the school that students frequently learn from each other, especially in the early stages of mathematics learning.

6.4. Irish

Most students show only a little interest in learning Irish. When a student shows interest, the school responds.

Students of a large number of nationalities attend the school including Polish, German, Croatian, Swiss, English, French, Spanish as well as Irish. Many of the students are bilingual.

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

A large number of subjects are being learned by students. Evidence of this was clear as we moved about the school. The school has access to a wide range of curricula from which students can choose. Several students are taking the IGCSE (International GCSE) examination. They will sit the examination in Belfast in May. Their work is self-directed. Among the subjects being studied are English, science, mathematics, Italian, history. Students can take A-levels as well.

A student who is studying IT was working on updating the school's IT system as a project. Another student was lighting the fire. In a small room some younger students were playing a game.

6.6. Special educational needs

With regard to learning difficulties and special educational needs, where the school sees a need, it responds. Student anxiety is one area where students who have left mainstream school have needed help, and the school staff have upskilled themselves to address these needs.

Where a student experiences difficulty in learning, especially with regard to literacy and numeracy, and ask for help, they receive it. If the solution to a student's difficulties were not available within the school, the school would find suitable resources.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

The fundamental basis for a Sudbury school is that self-reflection is seen as being a natural process in young children. The school uses this in trusting students to lead their own education as careful and confident learners.

Assessment of students' progress and the use of the outcomes of assessment to inform learning is fundamental to the educational activities of the school. With primary-age students, up to about 13 years, the school can observe the progress being made by a student. At lower-secondary level, ages 13 to 15, the school would like to see that a student is developing their own ideas of what they might like to do. They would like to see them begin to think more independently. Students at this stage would be looking at what they need to do to achieve their goals. The school supports them in this.

As a student is deciding what they would like to do, they begin their own natural process of self-assessment. The school helps them with this and with articulating where they are and where they want to go. Talking and carrying out informal activities with their peers helps this. Ultimately, the students are developing their capacity to self-direct.

The role of the mentor is critical. Students are guided by their mentor to carry out an informal self-reflection each year. In doing this, they look back on what they have done, what they would like to do, and whether there are perceived obstacles. The outcome of the self-reflections of students feeds into the school's planning for staffing and other resources. At the end of each term, a student's mentor

prepares a report. The report, especially in the case of the older students, summarises the progress being made. As part of the self-reflection, the current activities, concerns, and plans of the student are described. It is evident from each of the three exemplars seen in the course of the assessment that the student's academic progress and plans together with their social and emotional concerns and development are a part of the review. Through it a student plans for their academic progress and reviews and assesses that progress with help and guidance from their mentor.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

The following policies and documentation were made available:

- School calendar
- Child safeguarding statement and risk assessment
- Health and safety statement.
- Chart of school governance (Circles)
- Exemplar student records
- Form for members of the school community to bring a matter to the School Meeting
- A form for dealing with an issue by the Just Chat committee
- Community Agreements: School Rules and Code of Behaviour
- Student Handbook

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

The education provided to the pupils of Sligo Sudbury School can be characterised as “a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual, and social.”

The reasons that that this judgement has been made in respect of the educational provision in the school are the following.

- Students are responsible for their education. They experience making decisions and dealing with the consequences of their choices and are motivated to learn.
- The role of their mentor is fundamental in supporting students.
- Students plan for their academic progress, and they review and assess that progress with help and guidance from their mentor.
- The school has a child safeguarding statement and has appointed a designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person.
- Through a student managing their needs in the context of the school community, much learning is continually taking place.
- It is the school's experience that by the age of twelve all students are reading equally well.
- A student's learning of mathematics is stimulated by their needs and interests.
- The *Student Handbook* is a comprehensive resource for students and their parents on all aspects of the school.

- Assessment of students' progress and the use of the outcomes of assessment to inform learning is fundamental to the educational activities of the school.
- Students are guided by their mentor to carry out an informal self-reflection each year.

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 finding of the report was discussed with the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees and one of the school's founders at the conclusion of the visit on 25th January 2023. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain the pupils of Sligo Sudbury School Faughts, Dunally, Calry, Co Sligo, F91 DR13 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 Sligo Sudbury 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