

**ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT &
REGISTRATION**

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

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

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

St. Nicholas Montessori School

Address

16 Adelaide Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, A96H5P3.

Name of Principal/Director

Mary Farrelly

Name of Assessor/s

Lisa Duffy
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

9th April 2024

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	08:45		
Closing time:	14:15		
Main breaks during the day:	10:00	to	12:30
	11:00 (Rolling morning snack time)	to	13:30

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes

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)

Mary Farrelly

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 principal
- An interview with the principal
- Classroom visits
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the pupils
- Observation of the educational materials in use
- www.smsi.ie

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Saint Nicholas Montessori Primary School follows a child led approach to teaching based on the philosophy of Maria Montessori. It is a private, co-educational, fee-paying primary school, which was established in 1980. The school is a multi-denominational school, and caters for the spiritual development of the child, but this is not developed through the lens of a particular religious doctrine. All religions are respected and valued equally. Preparation for the sacraments of communion and confirmation is offered to those who desire it.

The school caters for pupils up to sixth class and implements all the subjects of the *Primary School Curriculum*, using Montessori methodologies and materials. Younger children are catered for through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision. For the purposes of registration, there are currently 64 children, aged 6 and over on the roll. Four classes cater for pupils in the three to six age category, two classes for children in the six to nine age group and one class for children in the nine to twelve age grouping. The capacity of the school is capped at eighty-five.

The school is under the trusteeship of the Saint Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland. There is a Board of Trustees in place, with formal meetings taking place at least once every six weeks. Nominees are re-elected every year and can serve for a maximum of five years.

The school enjoys close links with its parent body. There is a very active parents' association, who regularly help to organise, and assist at, school events. Parents also sit on the Green School committee. Volunteers from the parent body may also support children with their learning, or in developing additional skills, by sharing their unique skill set or talent during particular lessons or activities.

The staff value an open relationship with its parent body. Teachers communicate with parents by e-mail. Formal parent teacher meetings take place once per year. Outside of this, parents are welcome to schedule an appointment to meet their child's teacher, to discuss any concerns which they have about their child.

The school is a member of the Association of Independent Junior Schools (AIJS).

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

The school employs fully qualified Montessori teachers, who are dedicated to fostering a love of learning while allowing each child to progress at their own individual pace. Staffing consists of the principal, Mary Farrelly, and fifteen teachers. The school also employs a French teacher, and an Irish teacher who supplements the teaching of Irish within the classrooms, on a part time basis. An external sports coach is also employed. Optional piano lessons are offered by an external teacher. There are currently two special needs assistants on the staff, who are employed directly by parents. The staff also have the support of a full-time secretary and an administrator.

Formal staff meetings are held regularly, approximately once every 4-5 weeks. Meetings between staff who teach the same age grouping also take place, as necessary. Ongoing professional development is key to growth at St. Nicholas Montessori Primary School. Staff receive continuous professional development from St. Nicholas Teachers Association and the Association Montessori Internationale.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school opens its doors to receive children from 08:45. A principle of Montessori education is that schools accommodate a period of undisturbed, self-chosen work for a minimum of three hours, which commences shortly after the children arrive each morning. The school day ends at 14:15. Pupils have the option to attend after school care until 18:00. Pupils receive a mid-morning rolling snack time and a thirty-minute lunch break.

The school academic year is similar to the mainstream academic year. Attendance levels are good, and a record is kept of all absences.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The school is housed in the former Mariner's church, close to Dun Laoghaire harbour, and was originally a school for the children of sailors. The original church entrance is now the main entrance into the school. A large bright and airy entrance hall, with a reception desk and seated area, welcomes visitors as they enter the school. The school is spread over four floors, with the youngest children housed on the ground floor, and the older children on the upper floors. Students at the primary school are grouped into three-year age groupings. There are three primary school classrooms (along with four ECCE classrooms). The learning environment is welcoming and has been carefully prepared to support the developmental and educational needs of the pupils. The pupils have freedom of movement, and freedom to choose their own activities, within their learning spaces. Each classroom includes a full range of Montessori materials, appropriate to the stage of development of the children. Montessori materials are attractive, multi-sensory learning tools that encourage hands-on learning, independent problem solving, and analytical thinking. Many of the materials are self-correcting and are designed to facilitate the child in progressing from the concrete to the abstract. Children manipulate concrete materials, until they are confident to work with the concept in an abstract manner. Computers and iPads are available for research when so required. Classrooms are attractive and well maintained, with examples of pupils' work on display in the rooms and hallways. The school is fortunate to have a spacious multi-purpose hall, with stained glass windows and high ceilings. There is also a staff room, library and a small outdoor space.

In Montessori education, the classroom is seen as only a starting point for children's learning. The school avails of the many amenities which the locality has to offer, and children are brought out to explore, and learn from, the wider world. This includes the surrounding parks, the harbour and shoreline, the local library and nearby sports facilities.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

All subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum* are covered, using Montessori methodologies and equipment. Some textbooks are also used to support learning. The curriculum is delivered in an individual, child focused manner, with teachers carefully observing children and introducing appropriate materials when deemed beneficial. Progress is guided by the pupil's readiness to acquire a skill before moving on to another skill. The curriculum aims to develop in children the qualities of self-confidence and self-direction and encourages children to develop key skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication. Pupils also learn to interact with others with courtesy and to respect their environment.

Classes correspond to three-year mixed-age groupings, with two teachers supporting and guiding the pupils within each of these groupings. Pupils have the freedom to move freely within their learning environment. A range of concrete materials, textbooks and class libraries are readily available to support the implementation of the curriculum. Interconnected and interrelated activities are planned, as is integral to the Montessori philosophy, with pupils gradually progressing from using concrete materials to abstract representation.

Pupils are also encouraged to explore the wider environment. Effective links have been forged within the local community, with pupils partaking in local clean up days, singing with the Move4Parkinsons choir or engaging in Seashore Kids or forest school activities. Educational activities are supplemented with trips to a variety of places that support the educational development of the children, such as art galleries, the *Lexicon* library and the *Van Gogh* experience. Annual events, such as the Christmas and end of year performances, are supported by the wider school community.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

A range of Montessori resources, as well as suitable textbooks, are available for students use to develop language and literacy skills. The phonetic approach is used initially, with the child exploring the sounds which make up English. Sandpaper letters, which correspond to the sounds, are introduced. The development of language and literacy skills is constantly reinforced by providing language rich experiences within the classroom. All pupils have library cards, and frequently visit, and partake in events in the local *Lexicon* library. There are also well stocked classroom libraries available for the students use. Creative writing is introduced as pupils progress through the school. Pupils also develop cursive writing skills.

Oral language development permeates the whole day, with pupils often making oral presentations to their peers. Language is used to explore all other learning areas. Grammar, punctuation and parts of speech are taught, in a hands-on and active manner, using Montessori materials and methods.

Pupils partake in *World Book Day* and *World Poetry Day* events.

6.3. Numeracy

All strands of the *Primary School Curriculum* are covered, with activities tailored to each child's individual needs. Evidence of a numeracy rich environment was viewed during the assessment, with each class having access to an array of mathematics equipment. Pupils are initially exposed to mathematical concepts through the manipulation of concrete materials, gradually progressing towards working independently using abstract representation without supports. The pupils work both independently and collaboratively, guided and facilitated by the teacher. *Planet Maths* and *Busy at Maths* are used as a support and guide for learning. Examples of pupils' work were viewed during the assessment.

6.4. Irish

Irish is taught by both a specialist teacher, and classroom teachers, if they have the skillset to do so. Teachers wish to instil a love of Irish in the children and pupils of all abilities are encouraged to take part in lessons. There is an emphasis on developing oral language skills, using songs, rhymes and poetry. Reading and writing skills are also developed, with the textbook *Abair Liom* used as a support for learning.

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

Pupils are provided with a full and varied curriculum in Saint Nicholas Montessori Primary School and learning is integrated across a variety of subject areas. Pupils learn through engagement in both individual and collaborative projects, by utilising Montessori equipment and through exploration of the prepared environment.

Culture:

The culture curriculum incorporates a wide range of learning areas including history, geography, science, art and music. Through engagement in the science and geography curriculum, pupils develop knowledge, respect and appreciation for their environment. During the school year, pupils have the opportunity to learn about plants, animals, and their habitats by partaking in Forest School and Seashore Kids activities, as well as classroom-based activities. The local environment is a valuable source of learning, with pupils actively experiencing the changes the seasons bring to their local environment. Field trips further afield are also organised to support pupils' learning, and from time to time, guest speakers are invited into the school. The skills of observation, questioning, predicting, and recording, are developed through participation in hands on science experiments. Procedural writing skills are developed through appropriate recording of these experiments. Examples of work based on the study of bacteria, viruses and mammals, were viewed during the assessment.

Pupils engage with the full Montessori curriculum in history, studying topics such as the history of the world, ancient man, and the history of writing. Learning is supplemented with trips to museums and places of interest.

Pupils are currently taking part in the Junior Entrepreneur Programme (JEP). Using a cross curricular, project-based approach, pupils are developing language and literacy, numeracy, problem solving, creative thinking and teamwork skills. Valuable life skills are being learned and put into practice, as pupils build their class business.

The Montessori method nurtures and encourages creativity, with music and visual arts taught in the school. In visual arts, pupils work with a wide variety of materials and also study selected artists. Learning is supplemented by visits to art galleries. In music, pupils partake in song singing and performing, and learn music theory. A Christmas concert, and end of year concert, take place annually. Pupils regularly sing with the Move4Parkinsons choir. A specialist teacher offers individual piano lessons to pupils. Drama is used as a methodology within the classrooms.

French:

French classes are undertaken by all children each week, covering basic conversation skills and introducing basic written work to more senior pupils.

Physical Education (PE):

Outdoor space at the school is extremely limited, although the school is fortunate to benefit from a large PE hall. Formal PE classes are timetabled for all pupils. Some activities, such as hockey or tennis, are taught by a specialist teacher. On other days, pupils partake in teacher led games and physical activities. The school has recently begun offering swimming lessons to pupils.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE):

Respect is a key element of Montessori education, and teachers spend time helping children to foster healthy relationships, promoting respect for each other, and for their environment. Pupils learn to take responsibility for their actions and are empowered in their decision making.

The *Stay Safe* programme, as well as relationships and sexuality education, is taught in the school.

6.6. Special educational needs

Saint Nicholas Montessori school has a limited number of places for pupils with additional needs. The principal meets with prospective parents in advance of enrolment to ascertain if the school can meet the needs of the child. If a child requires the assistance of a special needs assistant, parents are required to fund this. The principles of Montessori education are extremely effective in supporting all pupils, including those with additional needs. Pupils are free to choose their own work, and together with a hands-on approach to learning, a low pupil teacher ratio, and repeated opportunities to practice skills, pupils can successfully access the curriculum at their own individual level.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Formal parent teacher meetings take place once per year and a written progress report is issued to parents at this meeting. Additional report cards are issued if requested. Micra T and Sigma T standardised testing are administered to assess language and literacy skills and mathematical skills. Classroom based spelling tests are also undertaken by pupils.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

As indicated on the R2 form, all staff members have been Garda vetted and have received training in Children First guidelines and in the implementation of the Child Safeguarding Statement. There is an appointed Designated Liaison person (DLP) and Deputy Liaison Person (DDL), and notices have been prominently displayed in the entrance hallway.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

In my opinion, pupils attending Saint Nicholas Montessori School, Dún Laoghaire, are in receipt of a standard of 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 Montessori curriculum offers all pupils a curriculum tailored to their own specific needs.
- The availability and range of resources to support learning in each classroom.
- The information provided by the principal during the review assessment.
- The commitment of the principal and staff to providing a full curriculum to their pupils.
- The positive relationships that exist between the school, parents and the community.
- The provision covers all subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum*.
- Students are encouraged to become increasingly independent learners, who take responsibility for their education.

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 findings as outlined in this report were discussed with the principal Ms Mary Farrelly, at the conclusion of the visit on the 09 April 2024. It was stated that the recommendation would be to register the pupils of St. Nicholas Montessori 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 Review Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending St. Nicholas Montessori 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