

**ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT &
REGISTRATION**

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

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

**Independent School
Preliminary Assessment Report**

Name of School

True Nature Sudbury School

Address

Clonalvy, Garristown, Co Meath, A42 XD43.

Name of Principal/Director

Rachel Oglesby (Person in charge)

Name of Assessor/s

Richard Coughlan

Date of Assessment

18th January 2024

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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:	None		

Is school in operation for more than five years?

No

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

27/03/2023

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

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Rachel Oglesby (contact person)

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

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

- Information furnished in form R2 completed by the person in charge, Rachel Oglesby
- An interview with Rachel Oglesby, one of the school's founders, and another person.
- 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 and *Facebook* page
- School documentation:
 - Fire safety policy
 - Child Safeguarding Statement and risk assessment
 - Health and safety statement.
 - School governance (Circles)

Section 2 General Information and School Context

True Nature Sudbury School opened its doors to students in March 2023. At present, the school has an enrolment of twenty-two students, two of whom are below the age of six. Students' ages range from 5 to 16 years. The school was set up in response to the needs felt by a group of parents for an alternative education for their children, who were not thriving in mainstream school. One of the founders has worked in early years education, where play is the means by which learning takes place. This led to her deciding to open a Sudbury school. After much searching, a suitable school building was located and purchased by one of the founders. It is a former primary school building, the original part of which was built in the 1950s and remainder in the 1980s.

For the present, the school is being managed by the teaching team. There are plans to put a board of management in place, followed by a board of trustees. Both bodies will involve parents. The school operates at present as a company limited by guarantee (CLG) with the two founders as directors. The school intends to apply for charity status in the future.

Parents of the children enrolled were informed by the school's social media advertising and school's open days. The school has a lively *Facebook* page. There has been a good deal of interest in the school in the local area. Students mainly come from the Dublin, Meath, and the Drogheda areas. Students who are neuro diverse appear to be especially suited by the Sudbury School educational approach and are well represented in the enrolment.

When parents wishing to enrol their children first contact the school by e-mail or phone, they are invited to attend an information session. They then complete an expression of interest form and attend a meeting with the school. The meeting serves as a learning process for both parents and school. The student is then brought to the school with their parents so that the parents and school can make a judgement on the suitability of the environment for the student. The student then attends the school for a four-week trial period. Following this, the parents, the student, and the school decide whether they want to go ahead with enrolment.

The school encourages parents to become involved in school activities. Each day, they are met by school staff when their children are being left to the school. In September there was a welcoming ceremony for the new school year to which the parents were invited. They were also welcomed to a Christmas fair hosted by the school. Parents also help the school where possible, for example with regard to IT and small repairs.

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. Students are solely responsible for their education and how they learn.

The school sets out to provide an atmosphere of acceptance, which values each person's uniqueness and individual learning styles. The school trusts each student with responsibility for their learning. Parents of students pay a fee, and this is the school's main source of income.

The school is run through the School Meeting and nine Circles, each with responsibility for a particular area in the day-to-day running of the school. The school meeting takes place twice each week, on a Monday and a Thursday. 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 agreements, it is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. The secretary of the school meeting is a staff member or a senior student. Any student can draft and put forward a proposal which, if agreed to by the school meeting, can be included in the school's agreements. During the meetings there are discussions on the proposals and decisions are taken. When a proposal is accepted then it becomes an agreement. A record is kept on file and is displayed on the school notice board so that parents can see the agreements.

Among the circles that report to the school meeting are the those for finance, fundraising, staffing and volunteers, admissions, health and safety, and school events. There are two staff members on each circle. Two of the circles are considered of most importance for students - the Morning Circle and the Just Chat Circle. The morning circle is where every morning at 10:30 everyone stands in a circle for about 10 minutes and checks in on what is happening.

The just chat circle is the forum that deals with inter-student conflict and disciplinary issues. It has two meetings each week. If a student has an issue, they put it in writing and place it in a special box. If the issue is between two students, both are spoken to and invited to attend the meeting of the circle. The circle's approach to resolving conflict and disciplinary issues is that of restorative practise. It aims to help students learn through the process of resolving issues. The just chat circle includes students and staff members and the people who have brought the issue to the circle. The circle reports to the school meeting. The school considers that just chat circle is working well; students take it seriously and a lot of learning takes place.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

As a Sudbury school, the school does not have a designated principal and decisions are made democratically by all staff. Four paid facilitators and three volunteers staff the school. The facilitators and volunteers work with the students in meeting their educational and other needs. Two of the facilitators are on duty each day from 08:30 to 16:30. In addition, there is one volunteer staff available from 10.30 to 14.30 during the core hours.

The school sees the role of staff and volunteers as holding a space within which students can follow their interests. The staff find that while some students are clear as to their interests, others are less clear and may need help from staff members.

Staff have a team meeting each week where students' needs are shared with a view to giving them support.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school follows the primary school calendar and finishes for the year in mid-June. It is open from 08:30 to 16:30 each day. The core school hours for which everyone must be present are from 10:30 to 14:30. Most students attend during this time.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

True Nature Sudbury School is located in countryside north of Dublin city and near the Meath-Dublin border. There are ample outdoor play areas surrounding the school, which is on a 1.6-acre site. The school building is quite large and there are many work and play spaces within it. There are trees in the grounds of the school and an outdoors covered space has a mudpie kitchen. There are plans to develop the outdoor facilities including getting more outdoor equipment.

Many of the rooms of the school have been designated for specific purposes. For example, the school's office serves also as a quiet room. Room designations are in many cases temporary and are being continually reviewed. Parents and friends of the school have been generous in their donations of books, games, and other resources. There is a large room, called the gaming room, where students can play board games and many books are available. The room has couches and also a work area for students. Students can watch educational programmes on television in this room. Because of its large size, the room is also used for school meetings and other functions.

On the day of the onsite visit, the school's digital/audio workspace was being used by a student who was preparing a podcast. She played part of the podcast that she had already recorded. It was excellent. The school has an art room, and another room may shortly be dedicated to *Lego*, to accommodate the many sets and pieces of *Lego* stored in different places.

Students' work is on display on the walls of the school. Pictures of staff and students are also on display. In the corridor are the "cubbies" where students store their possessions.

The well sized hall that serves as an indoor play area has a stage with some musical instruments. It was the venue for the Christmas fair. The school is considering opening a music room. There are two kitchens, one small in size and the other very small. During the assessment visit, buns were being prepared by students with assistance from a staff member. In the same room, a game of chess was being played.

There is another large indoor area that the school has not yet used. Inside the main door of the school is the signing in/out sheet for students and on a noticeboard are pictures of the staff who are on duty.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

Each student has their own curriculum that is based on them following their interests. As these interests develop, the need to pursue them leads students to learning reading, writing, mathematics, and other subjects. The role of the staff members, called facilitators, is to help students to clarify their interests.

While students' learning is quite informal and unstructured, the running of the school is very structured. In interacting with this structure, the student is continually learning. As well as learning through games and their daily interactions within the school, students learn through developing and putting forward proposals to the school meeting.

The school has its own IT network and associated policy. It has done a lot of work with regard to informing children about the use of ICT. It is the school's experience that the use of ICT can help develop students' cognitive skills. While students may bring in their own devices, the school has restricted the use of them to between 14:30 and 16:30 each day. However, there are exceptions, and students are allowed use IT in their work, when necessary.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

It is the school's experience that through following their interests, students develop a desire to read. Routine school procedures such as student sign-in in the morning and again in the afternoon are another small part in helping students in their early literacy development. The Just Chat and the school meeting encourage students to be able to read and write in order to participate. Students learn reading through seeing the signs on display. They seek assistance as they need it. The school has a print-rich environment with many books available for students. Most of the students currently in the school can read.

As part of the school's mentoring system, the development of students' reading and writing skills is reinforced. The school finds that students' freedom to play helps in developing their foundations for learning including reading and writing.

6.3. Numeracy

The approach to the development of students' numeracy parallels that used to develop their literacy skills. Through having a purpose that requires them to develop mathematical skills, students begin to learn. An example of this within the school, is the lunch committee, where students have to work with money and quantities. Similarly, the school finds that students playing the Pokémon game is beneficial to their numerical and other skills development. Understanding time is also an opportunity for student learning as there are clocks everywhere and time is important in some aspects of school. Finally, the Christmas fair gave some students the opportunity to do mathematical calculations.

6.4. Irish

Up to the present, learning Irish has been an aspect of learning in which no students has expressed an interest.

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 students get older, their interests develop further. For example, one student is following a photography course and is considering other courses with a view to taking up training in film making.

The school will shortly be offering *MovNat* to its students. This is a system of training people in how to move naturally and through that to become stronger.

From time to time two miniature horses are brought to the school. These are used for equine assisted learning. Three therapy dogs come to the school from time to time.

6.6. Special educational needs

Several of the students are neuro divergent. The school reports that the parents of some of these children have reported that they have seen improvement in their children since commencing in True Nature Sudbury School.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

In a Sudbury school, self-reflection is seen as being a natural process in young children. 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 their interests lie and assessing their progress. Central to this is the mentoring of students by staff. Students choose their mentors.

Each staff member acts as mentor for up to five students. This involves checking in with the students every week or two, or more frequently if required. The mentoring is carried out through regular meetings in the case of the older students. For the younger students, the meeting might follow a request from the student for some time together. The student determines the frequency and duration of the contact between mentor and student. The discussion between mentor and student 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.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

The education provided to the pupils of True Nature 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.

- There are plans to put a board of management in place for the school, followed by a board of trustees. Both bodies will involve parents
- The school takes care in judging its suitability for meeting the needs of applicants for enrolment
- The school encourages parents to become involved in school activities
- Students in True Nature Sudbury School, through having a high degree of responsibility for their education, gain experience in making decisions and are motivated to learn
- The school's approach to resolving conflict and disciplinary issues is that of restorative practise
- The role of the mentor is fundamental in supporting students' learning.
- A student's mentor supports and guides the student in assessing their progress. The mentoring system helps students to plan for what they would like to achieve.
- The school has a child safeguarding statement and risk assessment. It has appointed a designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person
- A student's learning of reading, writing, and mathematics is stimulated as the student pursues their interests in the school.

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 Rachel Oglesby (contact person) at the conclusion of the visit on 18 January 2024. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain the pupils of True Nature Sudbury School, Clonalvy, Garristown, Co Meath 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 Preliminary Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending True Nature Sudbury School will be registered 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