

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

Assessment of Education in places other than Recognised Schools

Independent School Review Assessment Report



Name of School

West Cork Sudbury School

Address

Coomhola, Coomhola bridge, Bantry, Co Cork

Name of Principal/Director

Kathrin Bierwirth

Name of Assessor/s

Richard Coughlan

Date of Assessment

29th March 2023

Date of Final Report

20th March 2024

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	09:30		
Closing time:	15:30		
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

01/09/2020

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

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Kathrin Bierwith

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
- Report on preliminary assessment in spring 2021
- An interview with two staff members
- Viewing of the learning environment
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the pupils
- Observation of the educational materials in use
- School website
- School documentation:
 - School calendar
 - Child safeguarding statement and risk assessment
 - Health and safety statement
 - Code of conduct
 - Anti-bullying policy

Section 2 General Information and School Context

West Cork Sudbury School opened in September 2020. Up to September 2021 the school was in temporary accommodation. Since September 2021 the school has been located in the countryside a few kilometres from the Bantry to Glengarriff road. The school building is rented from the Coomhola Salmon Trust. The school vacates the building each summer so that it can be used as an environmental education centre. The school's ambition is to own its own building. The school currently has 23 students and 7 staff.

The school is in the early years of its existence and knowledge of its presence and its approach to education is still spreading in the community. The school was opened in the face of a pandemic and in the first part of 2021 it had to close its building temporarily. It went online, offering five hours of educational activities each day to its students.

The mission statement for the school states:

Our mission is to provide a space for children and teens to grow and flourish; where they experience their voices being heard and valued and that they can be trusted to be contributing members of their community. By doing so they will have the tools and foundation to become more content, resilient and empowered members of society.

The school is a registered charity. Its seven-member board of management has been recently reconstituted so that no member is a teacher in the school. The board of management is the school's trustee. The school is legally structured as a CLG (Company Limited by Guarantee). A staff member acts as secretary to the board of management. A range of skills including management, administration, and health and safety are represented on the board.

The board of management interacts with the *School Meeting* in the governance of the school. The hour-long school meeting takes place each week and all students and staff are members of the meeting. During the assessment, the school meeting was in session, chaired by a student. The school meeting is responsible, through a formal system of proposals leading to the making of *agreements*, for the day-to-day running of the school. It maintains and updates as necessary the school's rules and procedures, as a *Register of Agreements*.

The school has set up a *Founders Group* of five. It has an advisory role and allows the school's founders to continue to influence the school's operation.

The school was holding its first student graduation on the day of the assessment. During the graduation ceremony, the student would present what she had learned in the school. Her graduation project was to set up a herb garden in the school grounds. She told us that she had joined the school in second year from another school. She feels that the school still has a lot to learn but that there is much potential in it. It is all about children taking their education into their own hands. She has learned to speak in front of crowds and has gained confidence. She has grown her own garden and last year she held a fashion show. Through her graduation, she is helping the school to define its model for future graduations.

The school has policies that address each aspect of its operation. The most up-to-date version of each policy is on the school website. Among them are the code of conduct, the child safeguarding statement, and the anti-bullying policy. It has a conflict resolution policy. The school 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 conflict resolution policy is based on *transformative practice* as a means of resolving conflict and addressing grievances. The transformative practice gives the parties to a disagreement a safe space to explore solutions. It is led and facilitated by a staff member or a student who acts as a mediator. Together they form the transformative practice committee. The transformative practice takes place twice each week. It is flexible in its operation. Its fundamental role is to help any student who is worried or upset about a school-based issue.

The school has an *Agreements and Certificates team* (ACT) that meets in the music room. The role of this group is to monitor adherence to the *agreements* that form the basis of order in the school's life. It also administers the certificates that students require to be allowed to use certain areas, for example the kitchen. The ACT takes reports from students or staff members on the breaking of a school agreement. The ACT operates through helping a student to learn about what they did wrong and to understand the agreement better.

The school, because of its radically different approach to education and organisation of time, has been attractive to parents seeking an alternative to mainstream education for their children. The school is fee-paying; parents pay *membership dues*. For some of its students, who may not have thrived at their previous school, the school can be a place of last resort. This challenges the school, and it has had on occasions to recognise that there are limits to what is possible.

Intending students at the school have a six-week trial or test period to help them adjust to the school and to see whether the school meets their needs. Both intending student and the school must be satisfied that the student is fitting in well and that the school is meeting their needs.

In a Sudbury or democratic school like West Cork Sudbury School, the school is run by direct democracy involving students and staff. Each student decides how to spend their time. Each student has personal responsibility for their learning, - when they will do that learning, how they will learn, and where they will learn. 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. It has been the experience of the school that very many of its students have developed confidence through coming to the school and have found freedom in expressing themselves there. Through being responsible for their own education, their maturity has grown.

The school is building its culture of self-directed learning in a situation where all involved, teachers, students, parents, and community are continually learning. Students, many of whom have transferred from other schools, are at different stages of adapting to the school's way of working.

The school's success is dependent on having a strong relationship with its parent cohort. This can be challenging due to the wide geographical area from which it draws its students. A parents' information evening is organised each term. The most recent topic was responsible use of technology. Other parents' events are also organised. The school organises meetings of parents and students with the students' mentors. Parents are supportive of the school and help out regularly.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

The school has seven permanent staff members, all part-time. One of them is a volunteer. One of the senior teachers also has the principal administrative role. She organises student admissions and acts as school General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) officer and is responsible for child protection. She is also the designated liaison person.

Staff training takes place on a regular basis. Dates are included in the school's calendar. Among the areas covered in training have been conflict resolution, mindfulness, LGBTQIA+ awareness, inclusion, autism, and mental health.

All staff members are Garda-vetted. The school supports its staff members through providing individual supervision and also group supervision for the staff as a whole. The school has a psychotherapist available for emergency support.

Staff recruitment takes place following an interview process. On appointment a new staff member has a review after six weeks. Following this, support is provided as necessary before another review after three months.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school hours are 09:30 to 15:30. The school year runs from 31 August to 16 June and includes several staff development and workshop days. Students and staff take mid-morning and lunchtime breaks at times that suit their other activities.

As a school which is based on students' self-directed learning, the school considers that learning is happening all of the time. Staff and students work out day-to-day what they are going to do. There is a school timetable, however. This is to ensure that particular activities that are considered to be important take place regularly. The students and staff have put together a timetable for these activities, that may include mentoring, classes, and clubs. The colourful timetable is on display in the school's central meeting room.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The school is based in a large old house in the countryside with outbuildings to the rear and side. One of the students, who is learning to create video games, guided us on a tour of the building. The main room at the front of the building, which was the hall of the house, is the main meeting room. It is used for the weekly school meeting. It is also a base for students as it is where their locker cubbies are housed. School notices for the times of clubs and other activities, the rota showing which staff members are present, and the students' rota for cleaning and other jobs within the school, are on display there.

Beside the meeting room is a student meeting room that is also used for board games. The kitchen functions also as a social centre for the school. Students can bring their own lunch, or following training, make it. There is a food fund or kitty, organised by staff and students, which the school uses to make a monthly food order.

Outside the main building, the covered stables area is used for outdoor play and other activities. There is an area within it where spray painting can be done. There is another room with drums. The outdoor play kitchen is for the younger students. Alongside these is a court where football and other games can be played.

Back in the main building, the school has two information technology (IT) rooms and a music room with keyboards, a piano, and guitars. There is a library with many books. The school's large art room has many resources. Students carry out a wide range of art-related activities, including dressmaking.

The school's small office is also used as a quiet room. A school shop was set up following a proposal put forward by students at a school meeting.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

The school caters for children between the ages of 5 and 18. It is a characteristic of a Sudbury school that children of different ages are educated together. Children's educational goals change with age as they first develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and then use these skills to learn and to develop interests and abilities. In tandem with this, children's social and emotional development is taking place through their daily interactions with the other students in the school.

The school strives to ensure that each student has their educational and other needs met. They each have a say in the running of the school. Part of this is being able to decide how to spend their time. Each student chooses their own curriculum. As a student gets older, this may involve taking a formal course of study. For others, the learning may be less formal, perhaps through games or projects, especially in the earlier years.

The school has an IT policy and a content filter for its IT system. While access to students is in general quite free, on occasion they are not allowed to use it. The school helps its students to reflect on the impact of IT. Some IT resources have been found to be helpful, for example Minecraft and Civilisation.

Each student is attached through a "home group" to a staff member who acts as a mentor. The staff member meets the student regularly and their parents each term. These meetings review the student's educational and other experiences in the school, with a view to learning from them and planning for the future. Goal setting and achieving goals may be part of this.

Staff members' other role is responding to students' requests for resources including information on various areas of interest. These requests may be responded to on a one-to-one basis or particular classes may be set up. In general mornings are preferred for such classes. Students are encouraged to form clubs to follow their interests.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

The development of students' language and literacy skills is addressed in line with the principles of the school. Most of the students' learning in their early years in the school takes place through play activities. The school's experience is that students gradually begin to see the advantages of being able to read. This happens from, for example, seeing and wishing to read words in notices and in other contexts. Board games and video games also give students motivation for learning to read. The students help each other. As students get older and want to read more, they may approach staff for help. The school has a well-resourced library, and the experience of the school is that all students eventually become readers.

During the assessment, examples were shown of the work of students who were beginning writing. Students get help when they need it and just get on with it. Some students will also ask for help, for example to improve their handwriting. Sometimes literacy and writing problems come in conjunction with other issues as a response to how a student may have been taught handwriting or reading earlier.

Students make use of and develop their language and literacy skills as their interest in other areas of learning increases.

6.3. Numeracy

The situation with regard to 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. Staff will assist students. The school has had a maths club and a maths week.

All students end up learning the mathematics that they need. The relationship a teacher has with a student is key to recognising and exploiting learning opportunities through encouraging the students. Other students serve as role models.

6.4. Irish

Some students have an interest in learning Irish. The school has availed of the *Heritage in Schools* scheme. This scheme, run by the *Heritage Council*, enables heritage specialists to visit schools to help students and their teachers learn about and appreciate their local heritage.

The school has had a *Seachtain na Gaeilge*.

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

Because of the openness of the school's curriculum and its dependence on students' interests, many other subjects are taught and learned. They include Japanese, coding and game design, geography, archaeology, art, hiking, nature club and survival skills, dungeons and dragons, visual arts and stop motion, singing and choir. The school has a maths club and a science club. Students are taught and learn French, environmental science, yoga and mindfulness, and literacy on a one-to-one basis.

Recently, for the first time, the school has some students who are doing the *Gaisce Awards*. They are working towards the bronze award.

A football coach comes to the school.

6.6. Special educational needs

A small number of the students have diagnosed special educational needs. The school's approach to the education of these students is to reflect on what their educational needs are, and then to do the best that it can in line with its model and dependent on resources.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

The school places a high priority on keeping a record of students' work and achievements. Each student is under observation throughout the school year, including keeping a logbook. Entries are made each week in each student's logbook. Students' home group mentors are central to this as they guide their students and, in some cases, help them to set goals. A student's mentor or other staff member is available to help a student through seeking out material for their education.

The school has an annual *School Evaluation Week*. During it, students can give their opinions and suggestions on aspects of the school. The week is held in May each year. Students answer carefully framed questions that require them to think about their experience in the school and to give feedback.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

The education provided to the pupils of West Cork 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:

- The school is guided by its mission statement
- The school strives to ensure that each student has their educational and other needs met
- The range of skills available on the board of management includes management, administration, and health and safety
- The school has a child safeguarding statement and has appointed a designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person
- The most up-to-date version of each school policy is available on the school website
- The school's conflict resolution policy is based on *transformative practice* as a means of resolving conflict and addressing grievances
- Intending students at the school have a six-week trial or test period to help them adjust to the school and to see whether the school meets their needs
- The school finds that very many of its students have developed confidence and have freedom in expressing themselves
- Each student is attached through a "home group" to a staff member who acts as a mentor
- Students plan for their academic progress, and they review and assess that progress with help and guidance from their mentor
- Because of the openness of the school's curriculum and its dependence on students' interests, many subjects are taught and learned

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 two members of staff at the conclusion of the visit on 29th March 2023. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain the pupils of West Cork Sudbury School, Coomhola, Coomhola Bridge, Bantry, Co Cork 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 West Cork 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