

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

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

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

Wicklow Democratic School

Address

Ballybeg, Rathnew, Co Wicklow

Name of Principal/Director

Ciara Brehony

Name of Assessor/s

Richard Coughlan and Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

26th April 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:	16:00		
Main breaks during the day:	00:00	to	00:00
	00:00	to	00:00

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

00/00/0000

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

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Ciara Brehony, Principal

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
- Preliminary report 10 December 2020
- An interview with the principal,
- Classroom visits
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the students
- Observation of the educational materials in use.
- School website, www.wicklowschool.ie

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Wicklow Democratic School opened in 2016, following two years of preparation. At the time of the assessment, it has an enrolment of 49 students. The primary purpose in setting up the school was to serve children who were having difficulties adjusting to mainstream schooling. It was founded by a group of concerned parents and educators, many of whom had reported their children's wellbeing was suffering in traditional education. They wanted to give their children, and other young people, a safe community where they could follow their interests and passions. They took their inspiration from schools like Summerhill in the UK and Sudbury Valley School in the US. They also undertook extensive research and set out to create a different kind of school. In its website, the aims of the school are described as being to set up and run a democratic school for children aged 5 – 18 years. In that school there would be freedom for each student to pursue self-initiated, self-motivated and self-regulated learning with a curriculum determined by their interests. The running of the school would be shared among students and staff.

The school is a registered charity, governed by a six-member board of trustees. The board oversees the management of the school, collaborating with the school management regarding planning, policies, fundraising, and finance.

The school is based on the Sudbury model. Some changes have been made to the model by the school in the light of experience to date. The school sees itself as adapting the Sudbury model, which originated in the 1960s, to present day realities. It has the sense that it is in the process of growing that model together as a community, responding to feedback from students and parents.

Each student decides how to spend their time and 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.

During the pandemic, the school revised its conflict resolution method. It is now using restorative practice. The focus in this approach is on "what were you thinking". The Restorative Cafe (RC) is used as a venue for the resolution of conflict and to remedy the harm that may have taken place as a result of the conflict. In the RC, members of staff or students, who have been trained, use non-violent communication and restorative practice skills to resolve conflict. When a conflict arises, one or both of the parties can fill out an invitation form to invite someone to come and have a conversation at the RC. There is a relaxed atmosphere, which helps the conversation directed towards finding out what was the source of the conflict.

The RC operates on a Tuesday and a Friday. Following a possible attempt at mediation, a student can fill in a form for clerks at the restorative café. The clerks will have a conversation with the student who has written the complaint in order to find out what happened for them and what their opinion is as to what happened for the other person. This is the first part of a process that will end up with both students sitting together and hopefully reconciling.

Management of student behaviour also makes use of the mediation skills that are learned by students in the RC. They extend to other students and to school life in general and are practiced day-

to-day. When a student has behaved in an unacceptable manner, what led up to this is examined. Students learn to listen to each other as they communicate.

The graduation of a student from the school is a significant step in their educational career. On average, three students graduate each year. They are typically 17 or 18 years old when they graduate. There is a graduation event for which each graduating student writes something about the school. Graduation happens when students feel ready and are progressing to further education or somewhere else. Some have progressed to the Bray Institute for Further Education and others to further education in Sallynoggin and Dun Laoghaire. They have taken courses in the creative arts, pre-science, forensic science, and culinary skills. The school is working towards having an in-house diploma.

The school has new students coming each term. It has a robust admissions process that determines what the new student and their family expect of the school and letting them know what the school will expect of them. The student and their parents receive a briefing on how the school is run and the student attends a school meeting.

Wicklow Democratic School is run through direct democracy by the students and staff. The *School Meeting* meets each Tuesday and Thursday, and all staff and students are members. It runs the school on a day-to day basis. There is an open agenda for anyone to put ideas, proposals or other topics onto the agenda. Students take the roles of chair and secretary of the school meeting. The areas of responsibility within the school, for example the restorative café, are assigned to *Circles* each of which has one or more clerks. Each circle has a domain of responsibility that encompasses a particular aspect of running the school. Some of the school's clerkships are taken by students, others by staff members. The decisions that are taken by the school meeting are accepted by all.

The school depends on its parent body. There is a high level of interaction between parents and the school. A parent may call in to the school anytime. Some parents give classes. Among the subjects of the classes are English literature, Irish, physical education, and creative writing. There is also a parent circle, which organises social functions and groups that carry out tasks in the school. The school welcomes feedback from parents.

The school has a child safeguarding statement. It 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.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

There are seven staff members. The school usually also has an intern. It advertises for new staff on its website and is usually successful. Before advertising, the school reviews the skills that are needed. It also uses its database of CVs. It then uses interviews followed by trial time in the school. The role of a staff member depends on the person's skill set and each role also include some administrative work.

There is a weekly staff meeting. All members of school staff are Garda vetted. As part of staff CPD, the staff has done a nine-week facilitation course to equip them with the skills of working with groups.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

School is open each day from 08.30 until 16.30. There is an outline timetable from 09:00 to 16:00 each day, which includes optional lessons, clubs and other activities. Students have flexible starting and finishing times but must spend a minimum of 5 hours per day in school.

The school is in operation for about 162 days in the current school year. School holidays are in line with the standardised school year in operation in mainstream schools.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The school is currently located in a former primary school in the centre of Rathnew, rented from the local parish. The building is suitable to the present size of the school and has an outdoor area for learning and play activities. The school has settled well there and hopes that it might be able to eventually buy the building.

The school's classrooms are used for a range of different activities. In one large classroom that also functions as the school's library, a group of students was learning about World War II guns. This was part of their preparation for a project.

Other groups in the room were doing embroidery and working with *Scratch* on a laptop. (*Scratch* is a very large free coding community for children.) The approach of the school to students working together on an activity is to encourage them to try something and then to see how it works out.

The school has a kitchen where students can learn cooking. The kitchen serves as a centre for the school. On the wall is a noticeboard where students and staff can see the events scheduled for the week. The purpose of having the timetable is to ensure that ideas are carried into practice. This initiative followed from an external review.

The kitchen has several large tables where students gather and work together. A feature here as throughout the school is the level of interaction between younger and older students.

On the door of each room is an agreement for its use. A large room with a piano serves as a base for younger students. The school has a large art room with several tables. As with the other rooms, the room has a high ceiling.

Outside, in the school grounds are swings and small gardens. In one garden, boys were planting a crop. In the other there was a bushcraft area with a pizza oven and an outdoor fire pit. The grounds include a basketball court. The school is allowed use of the local GAA pitch. There are a few prefabricated buildings. One was in use for a band practice and the other was equipped for table tennis. An old bicycle shed is to be renovated for use as a practical work area.

There are many noticeboards throughout the school. In the corridors there are couches and small tables where students can congregate. There are books available in most rooms, including several bookcases in a room with computers.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

There is no set curriculum. Twice each academic year the school community decide together their priorities for the curriculum. Staff and students coming up with activities that they would like to see happen in the following term. Some are added to the timetable. None of them are compulsory and the school timetable still has room for the other activities of individual students.

While the school has a timetable and a core curriculum, students are free to choose what subjects they take, and no one does everything that is on the timetable. It is the experience of the school that as a student progresses through their teenage years, they become more focused on what interests them. During their final two years in the school, they become very focused on what they will do following the completion of their schooling. Some may take a Leaving Certificate subject, - teaching themselves with help from the school staff.

Taking part in the everyday tasks involved in the running of the school forms part of the curriculum. For example, there is a cleaning team for each room. In order to use certain rooms or equipment and carry out certain activities, students must have certificates. Examples are use of the kitchen, use of computers, or climbing trees. Students are also engaged in many activities related to the school meeting. One of the students acts as a librarian. They categorise the books and log them on the computer.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

Up to the present school year, each student has learned to read and write at their own pace, depending on their level of interest. Through the development of its *Beacons* programme, the school is developing the use of academic and other milestones. The idea is that students can plan and track their progress, for example, regarding literacy and numeracy. They can also set targets for other achievements such as being able to use public transport.

Through the setting by the school of age-related milestones for the development of literacy skills, it is expected that the students will in future develop these skills more systematically. However, the school considers that the impetus and desire to read must come from the student. The student may sometimes be assisted in this through the incorporation of reading into other subjects or activities, including playing games. It is the school's experience that the student will eventually see the need for reading.

The school follows a similar approach with regard to students learning to write. The school itself is a print-rich environment with many notices and wallcharts that give information to students. Students' written work, artwork, and other work is on display throughout the school. Proposals for the school meeting must be in writing. The motivation to learn to write can be developed from seeing their peers writing.

6.3. Numeracy

As is the case with student literacy, it is the school's experience that student motivation is the precursor to learning in mathematics. One of the teachers has a mathematics class. Some of the older students are studying mathematics on their own, with help available where necessary. Once a student sees the needs for mathematics, they are motivated to learn.

All of the students are doing functional mathematics, where they learn mathematics through using it in their other activities. The school intends to include mathematics in its Beacons milestones project.

6.4. Irish

Along with mathematics and English, Irish features on the school's timetable. Some of the students love Irish.

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

Each student has their own curriculum. This gives rise to the study of a large number of curricular areas. The school's website has pictures that show examples from many of these.

The school uses its Beacon milestones programme to identify the competencies that students should have at three stages of their education in the school. If these milestones are not being achieved, the achievement of them can be facilitated by staff.

6.6. Special educational needs

At present the school has students on its roll who have special educational needs. It is open to accommodating the needs of students with special educational needs within the resources available to it. However, it is unable to provide a special needs assistant to students needing one. The school's long-term vision is to accommodate all students, including those with a special educational need.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Each student is linked with a staff member who acts as their *Connection Person* or mentor. Each student is part of a group of five or six students who share the mentor. There are regular individual and group meetings of students with their mentor. These meetings review how the student is doing and are an opportunity to look at what extra supports that the school can give them. The mentor works with the students in exploring themes and practical school issues and ideas.

The school is developing the use of academic and other milestones so that its students can plan and track their progress. *Gaisce, The President's Award*, is available to students. The incorporation of the concept of milestones into the school's Sudbury model has been agreed with the school community and is in response to students' requests.

At the beginning of each term, formal meetings take place between each connection person and each of their students. These meetings set the goals of individual students and what they want to achieve. They also tell how they would like to be supported. This is followed through with one-to-one chats with the mentor and within the pod. In that way, as well as being supported by their teachers, students learn from each other's challenges and goals.

Students' parents are also involved, and the school receives feedback from them. Communication within the school staff is helped by the retention of a detailed profile of each student. This can be added to and shared among staff. They help in feeding back information on their children's progress to parents.

There are two parent-teacher meetings each year, where parents meet their children's pod connection teacher.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

The education provided to the pupils of Wicklow Democratic 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 had an external person who evaluated its performance and as a result the school made changes including the incorporation of milestones through which students’ progress can be measured
- Each student is linked with a staff member who acts as their Connection Person or mentor.
- During the pandemic, the school revised its conflict resolution method. It is now using restorative practice.
- The school has a child safeguarding policy and has appointed a designated liaison person and a deputy designated liaison person
- On average, three students graduate each year.
- There is a high level of interaction between parents and the school. The school has two parent-teacher meetings each year.
- Through the setting by the school of age-related milestones for the development of literacy and numeracy skills, it is expected that the students will in future develop these skills more systematically.
- Each student is linked with a staff member who acts as their *Connection Person* or mentor.

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 Ciara Brehony at the conclusion of the visit on 26 April 2023. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain the pupils of Wicklow Democratic School, Ballybeg, Rathnew, Co Wicklow, A67PW18 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 Wicklow Democratic 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