

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

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

Independent School Review Assessment Report



Name of School

Wicklow Montessori Primary School

Address

Ballyguilebeg, Wicklow, A67 C421.

Telephone

0404-67766

Name of Principal/Director

Ms. Dara Mulhall

Name of Assessor/s

Lisa Duffy
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

16th April 2024

Date of Final Report

20th June 2024

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	08:45		
Closing time:	15:00 15:45 for 3rd/ 4th and 16:30 for 5th/6th on Wednesdays		
Main breaks during the day:	11:00	to	11:15
	12:50	to	13:30

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes	
00/00/0000	

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)

Ms. Dara Mulhall

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.wicklowmontessorischool.ie

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Wicklow Montessori School is a private, co-educational primary and pre-school located at the edge of Wicklow Town. It was established in 1978. The primary school caters for pupils from junior infants to sixth class and implements the strands of the Primary School Curriculum using Montessori methods and materials. Younger children, (not included for the purpose of this report) are also catered for through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision.

The school has a multi-denominational Christian ethos, and is fully inclusive, welcoming pupils of all nationalities and denominations. Links have been established with the local parish and sacramental preparation is provided for pupils, outside of school hours, if parents so desire.

There are four class groupings within the school: junior and senior infants, 1st and 2nd class, 3rd and 4th class, and 5th and 6th class. There are also two preschool classes, offering the ECCE scheme. The school is a limited company, owned and managed by Wicklow Montessori School Limited. It is registered as a charity. For the purposes of this review assessment there are sixty-nine pupils, aged 6 years and over, enrolled at Wicklow Montessori School. A favourable pupil teacher ratio offers individual attention to all pupils.

The aim of the school, as stated on the school website, is for pupils *“to leave sixth class fully prepared for secondary education as caring, confident, independent, resilient, well-rounded individuals with a love of learning”*. Home-school links are very well developed and positive links with parents are valued. While there is no formal parents’ association, each class has a parent class representative, and parents are readily available to assist at school events, organise fundraising, or provide practical support whenever needed. Parents’ nominees also sit on the Board of Directors. Communication is via weekly e-mails, Instagram, class WhatsApp groups and texts.

Community links are also well established, with pupils partaking in local quizzes, clean ups or events hosted by local sports’ clubs. Annual events, such as the Christmas performance and end of year talent show are supported by the wider school community.

The school prides itself on the caring, family like atmosphere which is cultivated within the school.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

Staffing at the school consists of a teaching principal, Ms Dara Mulhall, and three other class teachers (four additional staff members work with pupils partaking in the ECCE scheme). A part time teacher works with junior pupils two afternoons per week in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The staff also have the support of a full-time secretary. Extra-curricular activities, including drama, music, sport, computers/coding and French are taught by external staff.

It was clear during the assessment that staff are fully invested in the school, and the high rate of staff retention is admirable. Excellent collegiality was evident among the staff and professional working relationships, based on mutual respect and trust, exist between co-workers. Staff meetings are held once per week, and staff plan together for collaborative learning activities, extra-curricular activities and assemblies. School improvement plans are implemented after in depth discussion and knowledge

sharing. Ongoing professional development is key to growth and development at Wicklow Montessori School. Webinars and courses which are deemed relevant, are undertaken by the staff, ensuring that staff are kept up to date on current best practices.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school opens its doors to receive children at 08:45. School begins at 09:00 and ceases at 15:00 for pupils every day except Wednesday when an external teacher teaches physical education. The school day ends at 15:45 for 3rd and 4th class pupils and 16:30 for 5th and 6th class pupils on this day. Pupils receive a 40-minute lunch break and a 15-minute mid-morning break. The school operates for 170 days per academic year.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The learning environment is spacious, clean, bright and welcoming and has been carefully created to support the developmental and educational needs of the pupils. The school is wheelchair accessible. The school operates a low pupil teacher ratio and there are currently 69 pupils, aged 6 and over, enrolled in the primary school.

There are four primary school classrooms. Classrooms are bright, airy and well equipped with specialised Montessori equipment, and other educational materials, which promote hands-on, self-paced learning. Classrooms are equipped with an interactive white board and a teaching computer. The school library, as well as individual classroom libraries, are well stocked and frequently replenished. The school is fortunate to have a fully equipped computer room, and pupils have access to desktops, iPads and printers. Hallways are well maintained and are decorated with pupils' artwork and projects.

A large hall, complete with a stage area, is used for assemblies and school productions. A kitchen is also available and is used for cooking and baking activities.

The outdoor space is secure, and pupils can play safely on the astro turf at the side of the school. Colourful yard markings enhance the outdoor tarmacked area and encourage physical activity. An outdoor blackboard, wormery, bug hotels and chess table enhance the outdoor space. An orderly and calm learning environment, in which children can thrive, has been created in the school.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

Teaching and learning are guided by the Primary School Curriculum and implemented using active learning methodologies. Younger pupils adopt a predominantly Montessori approach, with no formal timetable other than for learning areas taught by external staff. A range of Montessori resources, as well as teacher designed materials, is readily available for pupil use. Some textbooks are also used to support and supplement learning. Station work is used extensively in the senior room and all teachers utilise creative learning methodologies. The use of information technology is skilfully and creatively integrated into all areas of learning. Interconnected and interrelated activities are planned, encouraging pupils to work both individually and collaboratively, using concrete materials and active learning methodologies. Due to the low pupil teacher ratio, each child can develop to their full potential at their own pace.

As stated on the informative and well laid out website www.wicklowmontessorischool.ie, the school aims to promote the following:

- A love of learning
- An environment where pupils can develop to their full potential at their own pace
- An independent approach to learning
- An orderly approach to their work
- A respect and love of their environment
- Self-discipline
- Whole-person development
- Personal responsibility
- Preparation for secondary education
- An awareness of cultural diversity
- An appreciation for the value of difference

Pupils are taught to be independent learners and take responsibility for their own learning. Appropriate behaviour is expected, and pupils understand that rules are in place to ensure their safety and to help create an optimal learning environment.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

The content of the language and literacy programme is guided by the strands and strand units of the Primary School Curriculum, with language and literacy development integrated into all other areas of learning. Pupils learn in a print rich environment. As well as a separate school library, each classroom has its own class library. Valuable links have been established with the local library and book shop. The provision is also enhanced through participation in the Fighting Words workshops, World Book Day events, the annual book fair or by inviting local authors into the school to speak to the children.

There is a gradual development of reading skills as pupils progress through the classes. Initially, early reading and grammar skills are developed using Montessori materials. The textbooks *New Wave*

English, Better English and texts from the *Starlight* series, are used to support the development of core skills in literacy. Classroom libraries are well stocked, novels are utilised, and a reading buddies' system is in place. As part of the school self-evaluation process, teachers identified the need to improve expressive reading, and this was focused on during classroom activities. Pupils engage in self-assessment in this area, and peer feedback is given.

Oral language skills are developed through participation in speech and drama classes, assemblies, plays and through the presentation of personal projects. Using a thematic approach within the classroom, topic specific vocabulary is introduced and used in context.

Pupils write across the genres, using a variety of writing styles. They are encouraged to build a bank of writing in their own personal file on the computer or iPad. Spellings are learned and pupils participate in Spelling Bee competitions. Handwriting skills are developed using the *Handwriting Without Tears* textbook.

6.3. Numeracy

The numeracy programme aims to implement all strands and strand units of the Primary School Curriculum. Pupils are initially exposed to mathematical concepts through the manipulation of concrete materials, gradually progressing towards working independently using abstract representation without supports. Senior pupils utilise station teaching, information technology and active learning methodologies to develop their numeracy skills.

Textbooks such as *Busy at Maths*, *Mathemagic* and *Master your Maths* are used to reinforce and consolidate learning. Mental maths activities are practised, and mathematical language is developed among the pupils.

6.4. Irish

Irish is taught in all classrooms and learning content is guided by the Primary School Curriculum. *Céim ar Chéim*, *Bua na Cainte* and *Am Don Léamh* are used to support learning. There is an emphasis on oral language development, and on activity-based learning. Irish is promoted at assemblies, through the use of word walls and by participation in Seachtain na Gaeilge events.

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 curriculum in Wicklow Montessori School, guided by the *Primary School Curriculum*.

Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE):

The history, geography and science strands of the Primary School Curriculum are covered by class teachers, using an integrated and thematic approach, giving all students the opportunity to work as historians, geographers and scientists. Pupils partake in Forest School activities monthly, visiting local habitats, to explore and learn from their surroundings. They also partake in the Green Schools initiative and have recently been awarded their green flag.

The school prides itself on the quality of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) programmes offered to the students. Pupils partake in practical, hands-on activities for Engineers Week, Maths Week and Science Week. Each year, third and fourth class enter the *Intel Mini Scientist Competition* and frequently progress to the final. Through participation in this project, pupils have the opportunity to develop the skills of communicating, classifying, measuring, inferring and predicting. Pupils knowledgeably and articulately explained their current project on the use of electrolytes to me during my visit.

Fifth and sixth class pupils regularly enter the *BT Young Scientist Exhibition* and *ESB Science Blast* competitions. Pupils partake in the *First Lego League Robotics* competition and over the years have been very successful. Students work collaboratively on these projects to design and research their projects for public presentation. Pupils have access to a large Lego table in the main hallway and

frequently engage in STEM activities such as the six-block challenge or bridge building. Pupils also partake in the *Junior Entrepreneur Programme*.

When the opportunity is available, the school brings in visiting specialist teachers to conduct workshops.

Information Technology (IT):

Pupils have access to a fully equipped computer room and IT is introduced from an early age. This room is viewed as an extension of the classrooms, with the children frequently typing up stories and poems, doing projects or research work or using apps on computers or iPads. Pupils from senior infants upwards have a weekly computer class, taught by a specialised teacher. During this class students develop their word processing skills, learn how to use PowerPoint and Excel, and also learn to edit sound files, photos and videos. In addition to these classes, fifth-class students have an extra weekly class where they learn the fundamentals of HTML5 and CSS3 so that they can build their own web sites. Children also learn about staying safe online.

French:

French is taught by a native French speaking teacher. An emphasis is placed on oral work and French is taught through drama, games and songs. Pupils are immersed in the language and a particular focus is placed on accurate pronunciation. As they progress, basic reading and writing in French is included in the provision. Plays in French, written by the pupils in conjunction with their teacher, are staged annually for the wider school community. Pupils also sing French songs at the annual Christmas concert.

Drama:

Drama is taught once per week, by a specialist drama teacher, as well as being employed as a teaching methodology by class teachers. Pupils partake in an annual Christmas Play, which they perform for the wider school community. Pupils also showcase their talents in the annual School Talent Show. Pupils are encouraged to partake in the Arklow Music Festival, with classes often performing a play or musical, or individuals partaking in the Verse Speaking or Monologues categories. Every year a group of children are invited to attend the Association of Independent Junior Schools (AIJS) drama workshop.

Physical Education (PE):

PE is taught once per week by a specialist teacher and all children are encouraged to participate in as wide a range of physical activities as possible. During these classes the children participate in a wide variety of activities including soccer, uni-hoc, and basketball. Activities that build teamwork, develop skills, and increase fitness levels are included in this weekly provision. Coaches from local sporting clubs also provide blocks of coaching to pupils. All pupils partake in dance and movement classes for two terms.

The school is fortunate to have an all-weather sports pitch, as well as a PE hall, which ensures that children can partake in physical activities throughout the whole year. An annual school Sports' Day is held at the end of the academic year. If possible, pupils also partake in AIJS sporting events.

Music:

All pupils partake in weekly music classes with a specialised teacher. Younger pupils explore music through song, dance and games. They learn about rhythm and become familiar with using percussion instruments. Older children partake in music appreciation classes, study composers and learn how to

play the tin whistle and ukulele. The Christmas concert often consists of a musical, performed for the wider school community. Pupils also showcase their talents in an annual Talent Show. The school choir is used to enhance assemblies. Pupils also participate in the AIJS Music Festival where the children are exposed to an array of musical performances.

Art:

Art lessons are frequently integrated with a topic or theme being studied within the class. All classes use a range of media to explore, investigate, invent, design and create, guided by the strands and strand units of the primary school curriculum. Pupils also study art techniques or the life of a particular artist and discuss their paintings. Going forward every 6th class child will complete a mural tile prior to leaving the school. Occasionally school trips involve visits to art galleries.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE):

As part of school life, the school operates a family group system. Students are assigned to a particular family group and children of different ages work together on tasks, presenting their learning to the whole school at assembly. Older children are encouraged to help the younger children within the group, promoting a family like atmosphere within the school. Sixth-class children participate in a formal leadership training day at the beginning of the school year. They use the skills they have been taught in their daily lives and as leaders of their school family groups. They develop an awareness of being responsible for younger children, and their training helps them develop key skills such as planning, managing conflict, effective communication and working in teams.

Representatives from second to sixth class have the opportunity to sit on the student council. Every three weeks, meetings attended by at least two staff members, take place. A student takes responsibility for submitting an agenda to the staff in advance of the meeting and recording the minutes after the meeting.

School and classroom rules are discussed and developed together with the pupils, as their input is valued and deemed to be essential. Values and respect are constantly reinforced, and assemblies are used to introduce and reinforce positive messages and mantras. The *Stay Safe* and *Walk Tall* programmes, as well as relationships and sexuality education, are taught in the school.

As stated on the school website, *“Wicklow Montessori School endeavours to develop balanced, resilient, well-mannered, articulate children”*.

6.6. Special educational needs

In Montessori education a nurturing, supportive environment is provided for children of all abilities and learning styles. Prospective pupils are invited to attend the school for one or two days, while the staff assess if the child's needs can be met within the school environment. The school considers the individual's needs within the group, and pupils are enrolled if these needs can be met. In order to meet the individual needs of pupils, teachers who have free periods, work with small groups of children offering additional, targeted support, as deemed necessary. This, combined with the low pupil teacher ratio in Wicklow Montessori School, ensures that all children are well supported on their educational journey.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

A comprehensive system for assessment is in place in the school. Drumcondra Tests, which are curriculum-based standardised assessments in reading, spelling and mathematics are administered to all pupils from first class to sixth class. Teacher designed tests and quizzes are also administered. Teachers carefully observe the children in their care and act on their observations. Older children engage in self-assessment activities and maintain a self-assessment and learning (SALF) folder. Pupils use a traffic light system to explain how they felt about a topic and also critically analyse their work, or provide peer feedback, at the end of a project.

Parents are kept well informed of their child's progress. Parent/teacher meetings take place annually in January and a written progress report is provided for the parents twice in the academic year. The school has an open and welcoming policy, and parents can make an appointment, outside of class time, to discuss any concerns which they may have.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Policies as requested by Tusla under the R2 application form were provided, including the Child Safeguarding Statement, Health and Safety Statement and Fire Safety Policy. Additional safeguarding procedures were also submitted.

All staff members have been Garda vetted and have been trained in the implementation of Children First. All staff have completed the child safeguarding training. There is an appointed Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDL), with notices prominently displayed as required. Emergency numbers are also prominently displayed and easily accessible. A Health and Safety consultant visits the school once per year, to conduct an onsite audit and risk assessment.

Section 9 Evaluation Of the Education Provision and Recommendations

Pupils attending Wicklow Montessori School are in receipt of an 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 leadership skills of the principal, Ms Dara Mulhall.
- The learning environment, which consists of well-equipped and ordered classrooms and a secure outdoor play area.
- The commitment of the staff, who encourage and support pupils on their educational journey.
- The close collaborative practices between the principal, staff, Board of Directors and parents.
- The effective links which have been established within the community.
- The caring and nurturing atmosphere which prevails in Wicklow Montessori School.

- The information provided by the principal during the interview supplied a very comprehensive account of the school and the curriculum.

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 report was discussed with Ms Dara Mulhall, school principal, at the conclusion of the visit on the 16th April 2024. It was stated that the recommendation would be to register the pupils of Wicklow Montessori School on the register. The final decision regarding registration will be made by the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS), 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 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