



Photo by SEAN SMITH

Anthony Armstrong, publications editor at Learning Forward, explores the grounds outside Blarney Castle in Cork, Ireland. Armstrong recently visited Learning Forward member Maria Spring in Dublin.

# AN AMERICAN *in* DUBLIN

**VISIT TO AN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOL  
DEMONSTRATES LEARNING  
FORWARD'S INTERNATIONAL IMPACT**

**By Anthony Armstrong**

**S**t. Clare's Primary School in Dublin, Ireland, is a small school, with 330 students and 22 teachers. Walking the hallways, it could be any U.S. school — halls lined with artwork and announcements; classes with busy walls and bright windows; and a friendly staff focused on their students' success.

I met Maria Spring, principal at St. Clare's and a member of Learning Forward, during a recent trip to Ireland.

Spring and I discussed the professional learning needs and concerns of Irish educators. Although the structure of the Irish school system is much different than in the U.S., the professional learning needs and challenges are very much the same.

#### **IRELAND'S PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

Of the 3,169 primary schools in Ireland, more than 2,800 are under the management of Catholic bishops, with the rest under the management of various religious and educational committees (Catholic Primary Schools Man-

agement Association, 2012, pp. 2-3). A board of management, which consists of four to eight members who serve four-year terms, manages each school. The boards are tasked with, among other responsibilities, ensuring that each school adequately meets the needs of all students and the needs of “personnel involved in management functions and staff development” (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, 2012, p. 72).

In addition to boards of management oversight for school quality, the Irish school system uses inspectors to evaluate the quality of the schools and the teaching within the schools. The inspectors also publish reports on schools, assessments, and curriculum, and act as advisors to school communities and policymakers. These inspectors use a variety of models for school and teacher evaluation, including “whole-school evaluations, incidental inspections, and inspection of probationary teachers” (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, 2012, p. 175).

“Inspectorates observe teachers, although the principal observes as well,” said Spring. “The inspectorate looks at lesson plans, talks to children, gives feedback to principals, and makes recommendations. They report to central education centers and principals.”

### TEACHER LEARNING GROUPS

After the latest Program for International Student Assessment results, Irish schools started a national movement to improve their student results, said Spring. “We have always had staff development provided by educational centers, which are government-run and come out of the school’s budget. But the learning is not very structured,” she noted. “Teachers come back from inservice and share with other teachers. However, there is no implementation or ongoing support.”

Spring is leading a change to more collaborative learning in her school by implementing teacher learning groups. “We look at assessments for gaps in learning, and then our teacher learning groups spend six to eight weeks targeting those gaps,” she said.

St. Clare’s teachers view collaboration as working together for the good of the children and see it as a hallmark

of good practice, said Spring. She also does her best to encourage and model a culture of learning and sharing. “If the teachers see leadership sharing, it creates a culture of collaboration,” said Spring. “If we are not learning and changing, then we are going backwards.”

### PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

For Spring’s own learning, the Irish school system has a principal support network, called the Irish Primary Principal Network. The support network includes a website with a variety of online resources, email updates, listservs, a callback service for confidential support on the phone, a leadership publication, ongoing professional development events, and county network meetings. Principals use these resources to engage with professional learning, lectures, conferences, and collaborative opportunities in person and online.

Additionally, Spring uses her membership with Learning Forward to reach across borders to learn from her international counterparts. “I like Learning Forward’s webinars and reading,” said Spring. “It’s refreshing to look at other schools and see new ideas. We have to broaden our worlds by learning from other countries.”

After my visit, I reflected on the students I met and how they shared their lessons and sang a traditional Irish song for me. Seeing the reach of our work firsthand has helped me realize the powerful effect Learning Forward has on students and teachers around the world, and that is truly inspirational.

### REFERENCE

**Catholic Primary Schools Management Association. (2012).** *Board of management handbook*. Maynooth, Ireland: Author.

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