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Quality Assurance Department

Report of the External Review by the QAD

for

**Mariam Albatool Primary School
Raħal Ġdid**

**External Review carried out from
12th to 16th November 2018**

17th December 2018

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Introduction

School Details	Name of School	Mariam Albatool Primary School
	Date of review	12 th – 16 th November 2018
	Head of School	Mr Kenneth Busuttil
Review Team	Review Leader	Ms Dorianne Cachia, Education Officer
	Review member	Mr Anthony Grech, Education Officer

Sources of evidence

- School documentation (Pre-external review school self-evaluation, SDP document and other documents provided by the school);
- Pre-external review questionnaires disseminated to teaching staff, parents and learners;
- Interviews with various stakeholders;
- Observations carried out during review week by the external review team members.

Survey responses

Questionnaires were disseminated prior to the external review to the different stakeholders as shown in the table below. The highlights of the questionnaires' results were discussed with the Head of School during the mid-week review meeting.

Pre-external review questionnaire	Distributed	Responses	Response rate
Learners	51	32	63%
Parents	149	119	80%
Teachers	17	16	94%
Learning Support Educators (LSEs)	5	5	100%

School Context

Mariam Albatool Primary School, henceforth “the school”, is part of an Islamic complex which principally hosts the Mosque, the Islamic Cultural Centre and the Imam’s house. It is the only independent primary school in Malta with an Islamic ethos. It caters for the educational needs of Muslim learners and offers a curriculum which is generally based on the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), supplemented by Islamic and Arabic Studies.

It is a relatively small school with a population of 150 learners, 75 boys and 75 girls. Of the learners, 68% are Maltese, whilst the rest are of Indian, Pakistani, Egyptian, Jordanian, Libyan, Syrian, Saudi Arabian and Moroccan origin. The school has three kindergarten classes (two Kindergarten 1 classes and one Kindergarten 2 class), one class in Years 1, 2 and 6 and two classes in Years 3, 4 and 5.

Class teachers/Kindergarten Educators (KEs) in Kindergarten, Years 1, 2 and 3 and Year 6 cater for most of the learning areas whilst subject teachers provide for Maths, English, Maltese, Physical Education, Art and Craft, and Science in Years 4 and 5. Islamic and Arabic Studies is taught to all learners by three subject teachers. There are seven learners with a statement of needs and these are supported by six Learning Support Educators (LSEs). The school benefits from the service of a psychotherapist who is seconded by the Ministry of Education and Employment. She offers counselling/guidance support twice weekly on a part-time basis.

The Head of School (HoS), Mr Kenneth Busuttill is assisted by Mr Brian Vassallo, Assistant Head (AH) and Ms Debbie Atanasio who is a teacher but also forms part of the Senior Management Team (SMT). All school-related decisions, particularly those related to the Islamic faith and culture are discussed with the Imam of the Mosque, who is also the school's administrator and has a very influential role. The school works to instil in its learners positive attitudes of tolerance and appreciation towards other faiths, and respect for humankind and environment within a multicultural society. After the Libyan crisis, the secondary school had to close down.

Educational Leadership and Management

Review findings

The HoS has been successful in sustaining an inclusive and welcoming school community that addresses the needs of Muslim learners. His vision, which is shared by all stakeholders, aims to facilitate the development of the learners' Muslim identity based on Islamic principles, in the context of the Maltese multi-cultural reality. Although throughout the past years, the HoS, together with the two members of the SMT, has strived to continue offering a quality education to all learners both the HoS and the Imam reported that various external challenges had a major impact on the financial and organisational situation within the school. In fact, they emphasised that the issue of the school's financial sustainability is one of the most pressing challenges being faced by the school and is seriously limiting the opportunities for learners to develop holistically.

The HoS is a warm, approachable leader who is committed and proactive in bringing about meaningful change and smoothly implementing the present educational reforms within the national educational system, mostly the implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework, the strengthening of the emergent curriculum in the Early Years and the enhancement of continuous, formative assessment practices. It is his primary responsibility to ensure quality learning and teaching. He recognises the importance of distributed leadership through delegation. The AH focuses on issues related to diversity, inclusion and pastoral care while the teacher who also forms part of the SMT is delegated various leadership responsibilities. All stakeholders commented positively on the synergy between the members of the SMT. The HoS has also delegated a leadership role to two other members of staff, the Early Years and the Junior Years coordinators, who actively collaborate and coordinate with teachers and the SMT on curricular matters. A distributed leadership approach generates more opportunities for meaningful change and builds the capacity for organisational improvement and learner achievement.

The HoS conducts formal classroom observation visits and offers individualised pedagogical support to teachers. He uses an observation report sheet which covers a range of classroom practices. However, it does not purposefully reflect School Development Plan (SDP) targets. Focused class observations, which also place emphasis on the monitoring and evaluation of the school's present action plans related to learning and teaching, would support the successful implementation of these actions. The HoS shares the positive practices and the areas for improvement observed with the teacher after the lesson observation. The AH monitors and supports LSEs during classroom observations and offers them verbal feedback and guidance. Nearly all teachers and all LSEs appreciate the effective feedback given on work-related matters.

Curriculum time is not scheduled in teachers' timetables. Feedback from members of staff indicated that they would appreciate having more structured and regular opportunities to work together. This would allow the Early and the Junior Years coordinators and the teachers to collaborate more, plan curricular material and resources, evaluate SDP action plans and share examples of good

practices, within and across year groups. Furthermore, the periodical, purposeful presence of SMT members during such meetings would be an important opportunity to consolidate internal communication as well as monitor and guide curriculum development which eventually leads to better learner performance and achievement.

As part of its internal evaluation, the school gathers the views of educators through a specifically structured questionnaire. Although feedback from lesson observations was available, outcomes thereof, did not formally feature as an integral part of the internal review process. An approach to internal review that includes also parents' and learners' views, and that makes use of a wider variety of research tools, would make the internal evaluation process more authentic and effective. Among other things, including the analysis of the strengths and the areas for improvement derived from lesson observations and an analysis of the school's performance in benchmark examinations, would enable the school to formulate a more comprehensive SWOT analysis, giving due importance to learning and teaching priority goals. An evaluation of the school's action plans revealed that the school is working on an ambitious number of action plans which are sometimes too broad and generic, with unclear timeframes and success criteria. Writing SMARTer action plans, including the breaking down of actions into small steps with specific timeframes for each year group, would ensure the timely and successful implementation of these action plans and would facilitate their monitoring and evaluation.

Only around half of the teachers feel unequivocally that professional development sessions address the main challenges of the school. Although the SMT encourages staff members to take personal initiatives for individual upskilling, the school lacks an overall plan that addresses the staff's individual professional needs and the school's development priorities. Professional development sessions that balance the staff's professional needs with the school's development priorities, would result in such sessions becoming more meaningful, both on an individual and on a school level. Reviewers noted several staff members who are competent and knowledgeable in areas of pedagogy who could be tapped on to share their professional knowledge and skills with their colleagues. This would help to further develop a professional learning community within the school.

One of the school's main strengths is its small size, as indicated by various stakeholders. The family-like atmosphere and the individual attention given to learners are indicated as the main advantages. However, both staff and learners would greatly benefit were they to participate in more networking activities and learning opportunities outside the school community. Such initiatives would help both the SMT and staff to be part of a wider professional learning community and give learners the opportunity to interact with peers from more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Areas of strength

- The Head of School has been successful in sustaining an inclusive and welcoming school community that addresses the needs of Muslim learners.
- The Head of School is a warm, approachable and committed leader who is proactive in bringing about meaningful change and smoothly implementing the national educational reforms.
- The Head of School recognises the importance of distributed leadership through delegation.
- The Senior Management Team provides teachers and Learning Support Educators with effective monitoring, support and feedback through lesson observations.

A way forward

The development of a more professional learning community in the school can be enhanced by the formal scheduling of regular curriculum time meetings. This would allow the Early and the Junior Years coordinators and teachers to collaborate more, plan curricular material and resources, evaluate SDP action plans and share examples of good practices, within and across year groups. Furthermore, the periodical participation of Senior Management Team members in such meetings would serve to strengthen the process of consultation and communication between the Senior Management Team and staff members.

The Senior Management Team is encouraged to explore how the internal review process and school development planning can be ameliorated by:

- extending the research to include feedback from all stakeholders and increasing the range of research tools used to gather data to inform the prioritisation exercise. These tools should include attainment results and outcomes from the lesson observations by the Senior Management Team,
- formulating a comprehensive SWOT analysis, giving due importance to learning and teaching priority goals by year teachers,
- writing SMART action plans, including the breaking down of actions into small steps with specific timeframes for each year group,
- regular monitoring and evaluation of the action plans. A lesson observation sheet tailor-made for the school that permits the evaluation of strategies indicated in the SDP action plans and the identification of areas for development, would facilitate monitoring, assist quality feedback and guide school improvement.

The Senior Management Team is to carry out a Training Needs Analysis amongst all members of staff to identify their professional development needs. They are then encouraged to develop an overall plan that addresses both the training needs of the individual staff members and the school's development priorities. Furthermore, they are also encouraged to offer opportunities to those staff members who can share with their colleagues their professional knowledge and skills in areas of pedagogy. These opportunities would help to inform personal teacher development and continue to build on the knowledge and practices of all teaching staff as a whole community.

The Senior Management Team is encouraged to seek more networking initiatives and learning opportunities outside the school community. Such initiatives would help both the Senior Management Team and staff members to be part of a wider professional learning community and give learners the opportunity to interact with peers from more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Learning and Teaching

Review Findings

The school's curriculum is generally based on the principles outlined in the NCF with more time allotted to languages due to the learning and teaching of Arabic. Reviewers observed the focused teaching learners receive throughout their educational journey in the Muslim faith and the Arabic language. They also noted, however, that the SMT are not aware enough of the content of the curriculum being offered by the school in this area of studies since all lesson planning and implementation is carried out in Arabic. Such an awareness would enable them to offer more

guidance and support to these teachers in the planning and implementation of their learning programme.

Timetable analysis revealed that Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) is not offered by the school's learning programme. This subject, which prepares learners for adult life and which supports and promotes their personal and social development would empower them to develop skills that enhance their wellbeing, by identifying and developing their potential, thus enabling them to be more informed, confident and skilled to take an active and responsible part in society.

Meaningful and warm interactions between learners and teaching staff, complemented by good classroom management, are contributing factors to a serene and cooperative classroom environment. The classroom atmosphere is further enriched through the collaboration between the teacher/KE and the LSE in class. Teachers and KEs create several opportunities in which they interact with learners, asking them questions and acknowledging their achievements. Many instances of collaborative learning were observed, during which learners had the opportunity to engage in meaningful interactions with their peers, discussing questions or working together on a task. Increasing further the frequency of such opportunities empowers learners to become more active participants in lessons, exchange and challenge ideas, and learn to function effectively within a group setting.

Reviewers noted that in the Kindergarten classes, KEs were implementing an emergent curriculum which places the learner at the centre of the learning experience, taking into account the skills, needs, and interests of their specific group of learners. KEs adopted a predominantly learner-centred approach that incorporates play and experiential, joyful learning. Teachers in the Early Years are adopting a thematic-based approach. Reviewers noted several instances of interlinking of subjects through themes in Years 1 and 2. Even in some of the Junior Years, reviewers noted examples where the application of knowledge, principles and values were being taught using a cross-curricular approach. Securing the application of such an approach throughout all year groups would allow all learners to make connections between ideas across different disciplinary boundaries rendering learning more meaningful. Creative teaching pedagogies were observed in both the Early and Junior Years, which included appropriate questioning techniques, verbal feedback that encouraged learner participation and the use of a hands-on approach. Throughout all year groups, in most lessons observed, the right balance between teacher and learner-centred pedagogies was implemented. This is helping to reinforce learner's motivation and disposition to learning.

Last scholastic year the school introduced subject teachers in all subjects in Years 4 and 5. This decision was taken by the SMT for various reasons, primarily to ensure that learners do not miss out on whole days of lessons if the class teacher is away from school. Furthermore, the SMT could utilize teachers' expertise in different subjects more effectively. On the other hand, other stakeholders were apprehensive about this decision, stating that learners are still too young to benefit from it. Evaluating newly introduced organisational changes is essential to ensure that benefits truly outweigh any disadvantages.

The school has recently introduced a progress report for each learner. Teachers and KEs are now recording progress based on the learning outcomes which learners are expected to achieve in the different learning areas during their educational journey in the Primary years. In all progress reports, there is space for any comment that the class teacher, the teacher for Arabic and Islamic Education and parents might want to add. These reports are discussed with parents during the two parents' days held by the school. This recording of learners' progress is effective and meaningful in so far as teachers are using it to plan, to build on the strengths of the learners and to deal with their needs. In the Early Years, it can become even more meaningful if it follows more closely the principles of authentic assessment.

Reviewers' analysis of the school's performance in benchmark examinations in the last three years reveals that while it is performing below the national median in Maltese and English, the trend is upward. A marked improvement in Mathematics has been noted and last scholastic year the median mark was above the national median. Staff members are not well aware of the school's performance in these benchmark examinations. An in-depth analysis of examination results and trends would initiate a whole-school dialogue on the factors that are contributing to this performance, and how these can be addressed.

Areas of strength

- Meaningful and warm interactions between learners and teaching staff, complemented by good classroom management, are contributing factors to a serene and cooperative classroom environment.
- Teachers and Kindergarten Educators create several opportunities in which they interact with learners, asking them questions and praising them for their achievements. The classroom atmosphere is further enriched through the collaboration between the teacher/Kindergarten Educator and the Learning Support Educator in class.
- Kindergarten Educators implement an emergent curriculum which places the learner at the centre of the learning experiences.
- Creative teaching pedagogies were observed in both the Early and Junior Years and the right balance between teacher and learner-centred pedagogies was noted in most lessons.

A way forward

The Senior Management Team is encouraged to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the Islamic and Arabic studies curriculum being offered. It would thus be in a better position to offer more guidance and support to these teachers in the planning and implementation of their learning programme. External support in this regard might be required.

The Senior Management Team is to ensure that the provision of the curriculum is more in line with the National Curriculum Framework, particularly in Personal, Social and Career Development. The school may seek external support to tailor-make a programme for the holistic benefit of its learners while respecting the school's ethos.

The teaching staff are encouraged to keep up the good practice observed and plan for and provide even more opportunities for collaborative learning to take place. This would further empower learners to be active participants in lessons, exchange and challenge ideas, and learn to function effectively within a group setting.

The teaching staff are encouraged to extend the thematic/cross-curricular approach throughout all year groups. This would allow all learners to make further connections between ideas across different disciplinary boundaries rendering learning more meaningful.

An evaluation of the introduction of subject teachers in Year 4 and 5 time-table is encouraged to be carried out amongst all stakeholders, as this would give the Senior Management Team a clearer picture of the benefits, or otherwise, of subject teaching and indicate the way forward in this regard.

The school is encouraged to evaluate Early Years assessment practices in the light of the principles of authentic assessment. This evaluation and its outcomes can serve as part of the process leading to the development of an assessment policy that can serve as a guide for staff members.

The school should annually conduct an in-depth analysis of examination results and trends that would initiate a whole-school dialogue on the factors that are contributing to the school's performance, and how these can be addressed.

School Ethos

Review Findings

The school is managing successfully to develop and reinforce learners' Muslim identity, instilling in them a sense of self-worth and confidence. At the same time it is guiding learners to develop a Maltese identity by providing them with positive role models on how to live in a Westernised, multicultural society. During review week, this fusion of Muslim and Maltese identities was mostly evident during lessons and the morning assembly where both Islamic prayers and the Maltese national anthem are given their due importance. Assemblies serve as a platform where the HoS encourages learners to reflect upon fundamental values, such as kindness, peace, acceptance, cooperation and respect. Positive values and attitudes demonstrated by learners are celebrated, thus enhancing their self-esteem.

After an absence of several years, learners' voice is being given more importance through the reintroduction of the student council. Members were elected following a democratic process and each member has a specific role and responsibility. Apart from allowing learners to practise democratic principles, the student council is helping them develop leadership and decision-making skills and encouraging them to have an integral role within the school community. Apart from the student council and the participation of some learners in the Paola Scout Group, led by a staff member, the school offers limited opportunities for learners to participate in school and national initiatives. Participation in such activities would further help to give learners a voice and offer them opportunities to socialise with peers within diverse contexts.

Reviewers observed a strong and tangible sense of belonging and collegiality prevailing at the school. A positive and tranquil atmosphere characterised by a pronounced sense of respect was prevalent during review week. Learners and parents are satisfied with the warm and caring teaching staff, who demonstrate kindness and thoughtfulness towards all learners. Learners were observed to be happy, both inside and outside the classroom, and they spoke highly of their teachers. Positive relationships make learners feel safe and content. The behaviour policy offers staff members guidelines on how to proceed whenever learners manifest any challenging behaviour. During the review visit, learners' behaviour was exemplary.

Staff members reported that there is collaboration and support between the SMT, LSEs, teachers and parents in the formulation and implementation of Individual Educational Plans (IEP). Nevertheless, reviewers noted that the first IEP for the current scholastic year was only held during review week. A well-developed IEP which is carried out without unnecessary delay, as soon as the class team develops a comprehensive learner profile, would guide the educators to offer focused support to the learner so as to help him/her start working towards achieving the desired goals and outcomes. The regular monitoring and reviewing of the learners' IEPs would also help to assess the learners' progress, or lack of expected progress, toward the desired goals and outcomes and determine the way forward for the benefit of the learner.

Reportedly, learners with a statement of needs participate in an organised transition process, organized by the school, at the end of Year 6. However, this transition exercise, is not being offered by the school to all Year 6 learners. An effective transition exercise, organized formally by the school, would help all learners to feel more confident, considering the new challenges they would be facing when starting secondary education within a different context.

The support and guidance services of the psychotherapist who visits the school twice weekly for a number of hours is appreciated both by learners and staff members. Until last scholastic year, a full time complementary teacher used to support learners experiencing academic difficulties. This service is no longer being provided. Instead, the Early Years and the Junior Years coordinators and the teacher with AH duties, are offering in-class support, on a voluntary basis, to Years 1-3 learners with literacy and numeracy difficulties, as well as new learners to the school lacking linguistic competence in Maltese and English. In-class complementary support allows both the class teacher and the support teacher to collaborate actively together so as to link the curriculum content to the specific outcomes of the learner facing academic difficulties. This service is not available in the upper years. This limited provision is not enabling the school to reach out to a number of its learners, giving them the necessary support and helping them overcome some of the academic difficulties they would be facing.

All teachers and most LSEs would recommend the school as a workplace. Most parents would recommend the school to other parents since they are happy overall about the education being offered to their children. Furthermore, they emphasised that they feel welcome to visit the school to discuss any arising difficulties regarding their children. These issues are immediately tackled and resolved. However, a number of parents emphasised that they would like the school to update them more regularly about pertinent curricular or infrastructural decisions to be taken. A healthier partnership between the school and parents, through regular parental communication and engagement, is encouraged as this would also affect the extent and quality of parents' involvement with their children's learning.

Questionnaires and feedback from interviews with all stakeholders indicated that an area of great concern is the physical environment of the school. A general upgrade of the school building, especially of the outdoor area and the grounds where learners play, is urgently needed. Such an upgrade needs to take into account health, safety and security issues. A welcoming, well-maintained and safe, physical environment is not only conducive to but essential for learner and staff overall health and well-being. Furthermore, the challenging financial situation which reportedly the school is facing is not allowing it to invest in the required educational and human resources that are urgently needed if it wants to continue offering its learners the quality education they deserve. It is also impinging on the morale of all educators in the school who feel constantly uncertain of their professional future.

Areas of strength

- The school is managing successfully to develop and reinforce learners' Muslim and Maltese identities and instilling in them a sense of self-worth and confidence.
- A strong and tangible sense of belonging and collegiality prevails at school.
- A positive and tranquil atmosphere characterised by a pronounced sense of respect permeates the school, enabling learners to spend their school day in an environment conducive to learning.

A way forward

At the end of the scholastic year, the Senior Management Team is encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation, roles and functions of the new student council. Learners' involvement in school and national activities is further encouraged.

The Senior Management Team, together with the class team, is to develop the Individual Educational Plan of each statemented learner without unnecessary delay, as soon as they feel confident that they have developed a comprehensive learner profile. The regular monitoring and reviewing of the learners' IEPs would also help to assess the learners' progress, or lack of expected progress, toward the desired goals and outcomes and determine the way forward for the benefit of the learner.

An effective transition exercise, organised formally by the school, would help all Year 6 learners to feel more confident, considering the new challenges they would be facing when starting secondary education within a different context.

The school building, particularly the grounds where learners play needs to be refurbished. Such an upgrade needs to take into account health, safety and security issues. Furthermore, investment in the required educational and human resources is essential. The reported financial insecurity is impacting negatively on the quality education offered to learners and on the morale of all educators.

Recommendations

Taking into account the external review's findings, these recommendations represent the development areas the school needs to prioritise in the post-review action plan.

- The school's professional learning community can be enhanced by the formal scheduling of regular curriculum time meetings where staff members can collaborate more, plan curricular material and resources, evaluate SDP action plans and share examples of good practices, within and across year groups. Furthermore, after carrying out a Training Needs Analysis amongst all members of staff, the school is to develop and implement an overall plan that addresses the professional needs of the individual staff members and the school's development priorities.
- The Senior Management Team is encouraged to explore how the internal review process and document can be ameliorated by:
 - extending the research to include feedback from all stakeholders and increasing the range of research tools used to gather data to inform the prioritisation exercise,
 - formulating a comprehensive SWOT analysis, giving due importance to learning and teaching priority goals by year teachers,
 - writing SMART action plans, including the breaking down of actions into small steps with specific timeframes for each year group,
 - regular monitoring and evaluation of the action plans, also through a purposefully developed lesson observation tool.

- The Senior Management Team is to ensure that the provision of the curriculum is more in line with the National Curriculum Framework, particularly in Personal, Social and Career Development. Furthermore, the Senior Management Team is encouraged to deepen its awareness and understanding of the Islamic and Arabic studies curriculum to be in a better position to guide and support the teachers involved.
- The school should annually conduct an in-depth analysis of examination results and trends that would initiate a whole-school dialogue on the factors that are contributing to the school's performance, and how these can be addressed.
- To strengthen the quality of the support being provided to learners, the school should ensure that:
 - the Individual Educational Plan of learners with a statement of needs is completed without unnecessary delays, as soon as the concerned professionals feel confident that they have developed a comprehensive learner profile. The regular monitoring and reviewing of the learners' IEPs is also recommended,
 - an effective transition exercise is organized formally by the school to help all Year 6 learners feel more confident when starting secondary education within a different context.
- The school building, particularly the grounds where learners play, needs to be refurbished. Such an upgrade needs to take into account health, safety and security issues. Furthermore, investment in the required educational and human resources is essential. The reported financial insecurity is impacting negatively on the quality education offered to learners and on the morale of all educators.

Next external review

The next external review will take place on completion of this cycle of External Reviews. This may be reconsidered as a result of the follow-up visit as per Parameters of the External Review available at: <http://education.gov.mt/en/education/quality-assurance/Pages/External-Reviews.aspx>

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Appendix

Standards

- 1.1 The Head of School has a clear vision for the school and, in collaboration with the rest of the Senior Management Team, fosters and supports a professional learning community.
- 1.2 The school has effective internal evaluation processes that inform school development planning. The school development planning documentation (SDP) has appropriate structure, content and format facilitating effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- 1.3 Appropriate structures and good human resource management ensure effective school administration and consistency in all actions.
- 2.1 The School's curriculum satisfies learners' entitlement as outlined in the National Curriculum Framework.
- 2.2 Learners experience successful learning in a positive environment. Teachers deliver scaffolded lessons that motivate learner involvement, respecting different needs, abilities and learning preferences.
- 2.3 The school's assessment policy and practices sustain quality development at classroom and school levels through both formative and summative assessment.
- 3.1 The school supports learners to reach their full potential
- 3.2 A sense of mutual respect amongst all stakeholders prevails, promoting positive behaviour and fostering a sense of belonging.
- 3.3 Parents take an active part in the life of the school

Table indicating the average quantities referred to when the following terms are used:

nearly all	=	more than 95%, to under 100%
most	=	more than 80%, to 95%
many	=	more than 65%, to 80%
a low majority	=	more than 55%, to 65%
around half	=	45% to 55%
a minority	=	less than 45%, to 35%
few	=	less than 35%, to 20%
very few	=	less than 20%, to 5%
almost none	=	above 0%, less than 5%