

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning**

REPORT

**Meán Scoil an Chlochair
Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63221U**

Date of inspection: 01 December 2014



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**
I N S P E C T O R A T E

Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in December, 2014 in Meán Scoil an Chlochair. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

Meán Scoil an Chlochair is a co-educational voluntary secondary school operating under the trusteeship of the Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). In addition to the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes, the school offers the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and an optional Transition Year (TY) programme. The school also accommodates special classes for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The school's mission statement commits to the holistic education of all students and realisation of their full potential in a caring, supportive and joyful environment.

The senior management team consists of the principal and deputy principal, and there is a teaching staff of thirty-seven. At the time of the evaluation there were 498 students enrolled. While the town's population has shown a moderate population increase in recent years, the school's enrolment has increased significantly. Agreement has been reached with the Department of Education and Skills to move to an adjacent site and discussions are ongoing regarding a commencement date for the building of a new school.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management provides very good leadership to the school and has led significant school improvement.
- The principal and deputy principal are an excellent senior management team and are very effective leaders of staff and learning.
- In line with the mission statement, staff are very committed to providing a fully rounded educational experience for students in a caring and supportive environment.
- Positive relations with parents and external community members are well developed by the school.
- The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum.
- The facilities are very well managed and very good provision has been made for information and communication technology (ICT)

- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most of the lessons observed, and in some cases it was excellent.
- There was scope for development in the implementation of assessment for learning (AfL) across the curriculum and further use of active and differentiated learning.
- School self-evaluation and review are important priorities for the school and the school has very good capacity for following through on school improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The elements of best pedagogical practice observed should be consistently implemented with particular emphasis on the use of AfL.
- Greater use should be made of varied active learning methodologies.
- The recently initiated review of posts of responsibility should ensure that the school's priorities are best met and that recommendations in this report are addressed in relation to this matter.
- The timetabling, and staff and student allocation issues, particular to learning support provision should be addressed to ensure effective differentiated provision.
- Subject departments should formulate a detailed action plan and provide an annual report to senior management to support development of priorities at whole-school and subject department levels.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management provides very good leadership to the school community. It is very involved in the life of the school and operates effectively to promote its ethos, to support the ongoing operation of the school and to advance its developmental priorities. The continuity in board membership has contributed to a significant advancement in the school's development. A very strong dedication to the school was evident amongst board members and a spirit of partnership and solidarity is fostered.

Minutes of meetings include recurring agenda items and a detailed principal's report. A methodical and systematic approach is evident in the board's work. This includes very effective development and review of school policies. All mandatory policies with the exception of the Critical Incident policy have been ratified. This policy which is in draft form should be progressed to completion. Good practice is also evident in the preparation of an annual report and in the drafting and review of a very well formulated school development plan.

A consensus approach to decision making is adopted by the board members and commendably, agreed reports are issued to parents and staff members on relevant items discussed at board meetings. It is recommended that the board include teaching and learning as an explicit agenda item to further promote the 'climate of excellence in teaching and learning' which is included as a priority in the school plan. Further opportunities for direct input by all partners, teaching staff, parents and students, and the detailed review of school performance including at subject department level, should be promoted to help identify the schools' strengths and areas for improvement.

A highly committed and caring senior management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, work very closely to provide leadership to the school community.

Excellent teamwork was evident in the carrying out of their duties which include, an emphasis on pastoral care, instructional leadership, and classroom teaching, in addition to administration and organisational tasks. The senior management share a unity of purpose for the development of the school and provide progressive leadership through their encouragement of new initiatives and their promotion of improvement in student and staff outcomes. Consistent with the school's mission statement, a collegial and supportive atmosphere is promoted by senior management in the school.

The commitment of staff to providing a fully rounded experience for students was evident in the very wide variety of co- and extra-curricular activities provided. A review of leadership roles at middle management level has been initiated by the board of management with a view to identifying and better meeting the schools' current needs. This is an opportunity to re-align the needs of the school with staff professional strengths. It is recommended that agreed specifications be drafted for all posts of responsibility. Procedures should also be developed for the principal and board to receive a short annual report from post-holders. The principal should also formally meet each post holder annually, to further support and develop the contribution that middle management makes to the operation of the school. Continuing professional development opportunities appropriate to the post of responsibility should also be availed of by post holders.

A sense of community and inclusiveness is integral to the school's ethos. There is a very active parents' association and an active representative student council, both of which contribute to the development of the school. Meetings of the parent's association are attended by the principal and deputy principal. The school communicates effectively with parents and the wider community through newsletters, texting and an informative up-to-date website. In the questionnaires returned by parents, as part of the evaluation, parents expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The senior management team are strongly committed to quality improvement across all areas of school life. In particular, they have a commendable focus on promoting high standards and innovation in the quality of teaching and learning. To further this aim, literacy, numeracy, and school self-evaluation are on the agenda of all staff meetings, teachers' participation in continuing professional development (CPD) is encouraged. The school has been actively involved in a variety of educational initiatives. It is recommended that the agenda for all staff meetings dedicate time for the sharing of teaching and learning methodologies and CPD experiences.

An action plan has been developed as part of the school plan and is a comprehensive document for guiding the school's development. A literacy plan is in place as part of the current school improvement plan (SIP) and work has been undertaken towards the realisation of a whole-school numeracy plan.

Regular staff and subject department meetings facilitate collegial and collaborative work practices. Good coordination is facilitated by the formal meetings of groups such as the pastoral care team and Year Heads. It is commendable that organisation and coordination of activities also occurs informally.

Senior management actively support the work of the subject departments with the dissemination of self-evaluation sheets, literacy and numeracy evaluation checklists and templates for certificate exam results analysis. Subject planning documentation reviewed included many examples of very reflective practice on student exam attainment. To extend this good practice, an action plan to identify how the school's and the subject's priority

areas can be developed, should be shared with senior management as part of an annual report by each subject department.

A teacher induction programme is available to all new staff. Support materials received by new staff include good practice guidance on teaching and learning and dissemination of recommended practice by the DES inspectorate. Staff are encouraged to avail of CPD and the board contributes financially to supporting staff who wish to pursue professional development. It is recommended that senior management in collaboration with the board continue to prioritise and facilitate agreed areas for whole-staff CPD.

The school provides a balanced and broad curriculum to the students. New subjects, Speech and Drama, and Design and Communication Graphics, have recently been added to the expanded TY curriculum. The school offers Computer Studies to all year groups in junior cycle and TY and considers it an important support to the students' digital learning experience. PE is a very popular subject in the school and a single period is offered to all year groups. It is recommended that management consider providing a double-period of PE to all year groups.

Concurrent timetabling is utilised for Irish and Mathematics at junior cycle and for English, Irish and Mathematics at senior cycle. This facilitates transfer of students between bands as required. A co-ordinator is in place to lead the TY and LCVP programme and the importance of ICT to the school's continued development has been underlined by the appointment of an ICT co-ordinator.

A strong pastoral care team, which includes the school chaplain, supports students' well-being in the school. The team also includes senior management who have taken on the Year Head responsibility for senior-cycle students. The code of behaviour, which has been recently revised, is comprehensive, affirming of positive behaviour and contains clear procedures and a good ladder of referral. Year heads liaise with the pastoral care team and class tutors. A comprehensive awards scheme is in place to acknowledge and promote attendance, initiative and achievement.

The school's anti-bullying policy has also been reviewed recently. Parent responses to questionnaires provides evidence that the school deals effectively with issues of bullying and that there are very good communication channels for parents who have concerns.

Guidance is an integral part of the pastoral care approach and priorities identified include a focus on the transition from primary to post-primary education and from junior cycle to senior cycle. Overall, student academic attainment is good or very good in the school.

Learning support hours allocated to the school are typically used to promote literacy and numeracy. This is done predominantly by means of withdrawal from Irish or language classes and in a few cases by putting an extra teacher in the subject band. Team teaching is not currently used. It is recommended that team teaching be used as a mode of provision for special educational needs in keeping with the inclusive culture of the school and as a way of promoting peer collaboration.

A comprehensive learning support plan is in place and individual education plans are developed, maintained and reviewed each term for all students with special educational needs in receipt of resource hours. This is very good practice. A hard-working and dedicated coordinator is also timetabled for learning support classes.

Group education plans are developed for students withdrawn. One such grouping was found to include students with very diverse learning needs. This renders it very difficult to achieve effective differentiated learning. The selection criteria for the constitution of the

small groups must ensure that all students' needs are being addressed effectively and that the hours allocated are supporting their educational development. A large group of teachers are part of the learning support team. Consistent with best practice it is recommended that a small core group of teachers with appropriate expertise be formed to deliver the allocated hours.

There are two special classes for students with ASD and a policy of integration is promoted by the school. This has enabled the successful integration into mainstream of some students who initially enrolled in the special classes. It is recommended that awareness of research-based intervention strategies should be reflected in related programme planning.

Student leadership qualities are promoted by the mentor system and class representatives on the student council. Students spoke very favourably of the contribution of mentors to pastoral care in the school. The student council is democratically elected and has a voice in decision making. The student council is presented with the opportunity to discuss policies for drafting or review.

In the questionnaires and focus group meetings conducted as part of the evaluation, students described the school as a family and expressed themselves as feeling safe, cared for and happy in the school.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

1.3 Management of facilities

The school premises have been extended and refurbished over many years. The school campus is maintained to a high standard. The problem of limited classroom accommodation has been temporarily resolved through the provision of additional pre-fabricated units. A recent addition to the accommodation is a re-modelled canteen with seating for students. A breakfast club is also provided and is very popular with students.

Classrooms and corridors are very visually stimulating environments. Classrooms are equipped with data projectors and wireless internet access. The school has a very active Green Schools committee. Energy conservation and waste recycling are promoted as part of this initiative.

Health and Safety features prominently at staff and board meetings. Regular fire drills are carried out and a risk analysis has been completed and updated by all subject departments.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Twenty-two lessons were observed during the evaluation, comprising all year groups and programmes. The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most of the lessons. Exemplary practice was observed in a number of lessons. There was some scope for development in most lessons. In a small number of lessons there was considerable or significant scope for development.

It was evident in lessons where the quality of teaching and learning was very good or excellent, that students were engaged by the lesson activity and active in developing their learning. In these lessons, new learning was associated with prior learning and personal

experience, and students were provided with opportunities to think, problem solve, reflect and conclude.

The best lessons also prominently featured the very successful application of Assessment for learning (AfL) practice including clearly and appropriately chosen learning outcomes which were shared and reviewed with students, and students reflecting on their work to guide improvement. Very effective resourcing and management of supporting differentiated activities ensured that students were engaged and enabled to achieve higher order learning in the most successful lessons. An excellent teacher-student rapport also characterised the best learning experiences.

The quality of the teaching and learning in some lessons could have been improved by more consistent implementation of the features listed above. In particular there was scope to use a more varied range of methodologies to support students' different learning styles. In some lessons, the teachers' input dominated which limited the opportunity for active engagement by students. It is recommended, in these lessons, that a judicious balance between student activity and teacher-led instruction be achieved and that opportunities for co-operative and collaborative student learning be optimised to promote student participation in their own learning.

Lessons where there was more pronounced scope for development required a more differentiated approach to student learning and the identification and promotion of appropriate expectations for each student's learning.

Written work reviewed showed evidence of monitoring by teachers and self-assessment by students. Though there were some examples of high-quality written developmental feedback being provided to students, greater emphasis on embedding this important AfL strategy is recommended.

Literacy development was supported in many lessons and some excellent practice was evident. However, the school's documented literacy strategies were sufficiently evident in the lessons observed and further work on embedding the agreed strategies is recommended.

Considering the different strengths observed in the lessons, it is recommended that the teaching staff engage at subject department level in collaborative lesson planning and peer observation as a means of sharing and embedding best practice. Such an initiative would build on the school's experience with peer review and be most beneficial to the development of the school's capacity for self-evaluation.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Careful and serious consideration has been given to recommendations from previous evaluations. All of the main recommendations in the previous whole school evaluation have been implemented. These included review of the mission statement, post system, and procedures for policy development, and the documentation of an overarching pastoral care policy. A further review of the post system is required and has been initiated to better meet the current needs of the school. Senior management have developed clear strategies to implement recommendations from previous subject inspection reports.

3.2 Learning and teaching

A range of areas relating to recommendations from subject department reports was examined and very good progress was evident. The quality of subject plans was a theme in the reports and much excellent practice was found in the plans reviewed. It is recommended that departments should share good practice with respect to subject planning and all should include an action plan for their subject.

A number of reports recommended the use of AfL practices. Though there was some good AfL practice in evidence in some lessons, there is still scope for a more consistent and school-wide adoption of AfL practices. There is also a need to further employ active learning methodologies in some lessons as has been recommended previously.

Considering the benefit of collegial feedback and pedagogical discourse to the enhancement of the teaching and learning experience, the recommendations regarding the inclusion of teaching and learning strategies on the agenda of meetings and the undertaking of peer observation and team teaching, should be further developed.

4. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Self-evaluation and review are prominent themes in the school with the board and senior management actively promoting the development of a self-evaluation culture. Examples of good practice include drafting and review of the school's development plan, policy formation and review, changes to curriculum provision, and review of certificate examination results. A significant development in recent times has been the preparation and publication on the school website of the school self-evaluation report and the SIP.

All subject departments have completed a literacy and numeracy self-evaluation sheet and teachers are encouraged to use the student evaluation and teacher self-assessment sheet templates disseminated to staff. This is a very praiseworthy initiative.

In light of the school's record of successful implementation of various initiatives and recommendations from previous evaluations, it is clear that the school has very good capacity to follow through on actions it has set out for school improvement and to implement the recommendations of this report.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report.

The Board of Management of Mercy Secondary School Kilbeggan would like to sincerely thank the Inspectors who visited our school in December 2014. We hope to respond to the findings and recommendations in this report in the same constructive and considered fashion that they are presented. The Report that was issued was very reaffirming and positive towards our school community. In particular, we were very happy to note the following key findings – very good leadership provided by the Board of Management, an excellent senior management team, staff who provide a fully rounded educational experience for students in a caring and supportive environment, positive relations with parents, and finally, the quality of teaching and learning described as being good or very good in most of the lessons observed, and in some cases excellent.

The observation that “ Students described the school as a family and expressed themselves as feeling safe, cared for and happy in the school” is very heart-warming and reaffirming, as it fully reflects the school’s ethos, and it correctly captures the school’s sense of purpose and the reality witnessed on a day to day basis.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board of Management appreciates the detailed time and considered energy spent by the Inspectors formulating findings and recommendations. In this light, the school has undertaken the following.

- A full review of the Post of Responsibility structure in the school is currently underway.
- The school will generate a School Improvement Plan targeting AfL and active learning Methodologies, for the school year 2015/2016.
- The 2015/2016 timetable, which is currently being developed, will endeavour to ensure more effective differentiated learning support provision.

The Board of Management will endeavour to implement all recommendations outlined in the report as the school progresses in a positive manner into the future.