Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Coláiste an Phiarsaigh
Glanmire, Co. Cork
Roll number: 62301N

Date of inspection: 6 December 2012
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in Coláiste an Phiarsaigh in December 2012. 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, 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 observed.

Introduction
Coláiste an Phiarsaigh is an Irish-medium co-educational secondary school, under the aegis of the friendly society Gaelachas Teoranta. The school was founded in 1973 as part of the society’s vision to promote Irish as one of the languages spoken by the community in the suburb where the school is situated. A boarding-school was established on the campus also. It was a small school until the late nineties when demand for places increased significantly, a situation which continues to the present day. Places are much sought after by pupils from both English-medium primary schools and from Gaelscoileanna. The school currently has an extensive catchment area, with only a minority of students coming from Glanmire itself. At the time of the evaluation, there were 540 students enrolled in the school with a teaching staff of 45. The vast majority of the school community work daily through the medium of their second language.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings
- This school, which grew from a firmly-held vision regarding the promotion of Irish, has created an extensive community of Irish-speakers.
- It is considered that the current composition of the board of management does not sufficiently support the core work of the school.
- The principal displays ability as a leader of Irish-medium education and all that that encompasses.
- Leadership opportunities are created for people within the school and many take the initiative to assume leadership roles.
- The open attitude of the whole school community to the evaluation activities and their commitment to school improvement were noted.
- Management and teaching staff have high expectations of their students and all students are encouraged to reach their full potential.
- Students’ needs, both educational and personal, are well catered for.
- Members of the Parents’ Association are active and display creativity in their work to enhance various aspects of school life.
- The whole-school community is commended for its continuous efforts to overcome the challenges that are presented when working through the medium of one’s second language.
- A significant amount of the teaching and learning observed was of a high quality.
- Students in this school achieve very high standards, both academically and in various extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.
Recommendations for Further Development

- It is recommended that the management of Coláiste an Phiarsaigh should become the responsibility of a board of management separate from that of Gaelachas Teo. and that such a board be established without delay.
- It is recommended that the school’s overarching vision be clarified taking due cognisance of developmental priorities as identified through a robust self-evaluation process which gives a voice to all members of the whole school community.
- It is recommended that all members of the school community are made aware of the requirements laid down by the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.
- It is recommended that a renewed emphasis be placed on school-development planning and that further development of the Whole-School Guidance Plan form part of this collaborative work.
- It is recommended that consideration be given to ‘learning to learn’ as a pedagogical theme which could be implemented on a whole-school basis as a means of further improving students’ learning experience.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

One of the duties of the board of Gaelachas Teoranta is to function as a board of management for Coláiste an Phiarsaigh. School matters are discussed at general meetings of the board of Gaelachas Teoranta. The principal is the only representative of the school attending these meetings. Consequently, other members of the board have limited awareness of various aspects of school life. It is strongly recommended that the school should have its own independent board of management and that the main responsibility of that board should be the management and strategic leadership of the school. As a strengthening of the link between managers and other members of the school community is needed, it is recommended that the teaching-staff and the parents have representation on the board. The duties of individual members should be specified as well as procedures for reporting to the school community on the operation of the school.

The board of Gaelachas Teoranta supports management of the school in that they look after financial and building matters as well as advising the principal on legal or regulatory affairs. While they ratify school policies, they play little part in developing them. It was indicated that responsibility for the development of practices with regard to policy development and other key aspects of school life which require review and evaluation lies with senior management and the assistant principals. Although all the specified policies have been drawn up at school level and ratified by the board, it was evident that they are not regularly reviewed. It is recommended that an annual review of core policies become standard practice and that the matter of child protection be included on the agenda at every board meeting. Furthermore, a target review date should be set for every policy.

The principal has held his position for over 20 years, working alongside the same deputy principal until spring 2012, when the current deputy was appointed. The inspection team formed the opinion that there is a good relationship between the principal and deputy.
principal. They both show loyalty to their school, commitment to Irish-medium education, strong interpersonal skills as well as respect for each other and for the school staff. The principal has a significant number of responsibilities at present, but with the passage of time and more experience, the deputy principal will be able to assume many of those. It is a good that, as a starting point, the deputy principal has already taken responsibility for student care.

The benefits of creating leadership opportunities for members of staff is recognised. The teaching-staff is actively involved in formulating middle-management duties. It is good that these duties are regularly reviewed as this ensures a focus on the main needs of the school. The assistant principals provide considerable support to senior management and are commended for the enterprise they display when overcoming the challenges presented in an ever-changing educational context.

A new Student Council is elected every year, with representatives from every year-group. Staff look on council members as leaders and it is envisaged that these students will take on extra responsibilities, especially as intermediaries when staff are trying to encourage students to action. The Student Council welcomes the opportunity given to them recently to take part in the process of drafting the cyber-bullying policy. As many opportunities as possible should be created for incorporating students’ opinions in school matters.

There is a good working relationship between the Parents’ Association and school management. The school benefits significantly from their work to improve certain aspects of the school environment. The proposed involvement of the Parents’ Association in drafting the cyber-bullying policy is a positive step forward in encouraging parental involvement in school affairs in general. However, such an arrangement whereby senior management listens to the opinions expressed by the Parents’ Association is not sufficient in itself: parents should have formal representation on the school’s board of management.

**The school’s priorities for development**

Less time has been allocated to school-development planning in recent years. It is recommended that a renewed emphasis be placed on this key work. A redefinition of the school’s vision, arising from identified development priorities, should form part of this work. An action plan that focuses on shared priorities identified by the whole-school community should be devised. Such an articulation of development strategies would serve to further enhance the quality of all the work done by committees and individuals to ensure a high-quality educational provision. Moreover, it would ensure that school policies would be up-to-date and that the school would be fully prepared to engage with school self-evaluation and other developments, in the educational sector in general and in the Irish-medium education sector.

The principal is an effective leader who has always been cognisant of the vision set out by the school’s founders. Through his commitment to both the provision of a holistic programme of education and the fostering of the Irish language, the school has created a network of Irish speakers as well as providing a positive and worthwhile educational experience for young people, through the medium of Irish. Part of his leadership philosophy is the creation and promotion of good relationships within the whole-school community, a feature which was evident in the openness brought to the evaluation activities.
1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Senior management is very proud of the worthwhile learning experience created for their students and of the very high academic standards achieved by students. The high expectations that management and teachers hold for their students were evident and they are continuously striving for excellence. Significant developments have been made in the area of information and communication technology (ICT). Not only are ICT resources widely used in classrooms, but the school has developed its own software, which greatly enhances both internal and external communication.

It is very satisfactory that the vast majority of staff members are positively disposed to openly discussing classroom practice with one another and with inspectors. These teachers show a genuine interest in methodologies and it was evident that many of them were accustomed to reflecting on the quality of learning and teaching in their own lessons. The inspectors were given to understand that this has long been typical of teachers in the school and that it stems from their initiation into teaching through their second language. The principal displays a comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by teaching and learning through a second language. He, alongside other staff members, are owed considerable credit for the enterprise and creativity they display when working to overcome particular issue. It is a good that responsibility for the promotion and fostering of Irish is a designated special duty within the system of posts of responsibility. It would be worthwhile identifying this charge as one of the school’s key development priorities, so that members of the whole-school community would be focused on the issue.

The vast majority of the teachers speak Irish proficiently and deliver the content of their lessons with relative ease. While management has succeeded in recruiting suitably-qualified teachers who either speak Irish, or are positively disposed towards the language, sourcing of such teachers remains an ongoing challenge. All staff members should be mindful of the importance of accuracy when speaking Irish, and when preparing any printed matter to be given to students.

Continuous professional development is valued, whether delivered by guest-speakers or by members of the school community. Many of the teachers undertake extra study, or embark on projects on their own initiative. Other opportunities created for distributive leadership include working groups and the organisation of cross-, co- and extra-curricular activities. It is good that teachers get opportunities to work with with one another and to express their views on aspects of school life. Indeed, their involvement in various activities was a source of pride and self-motivation for many teachers.

There is a pleasant, courteous atmosphere in the school and it is clear that students feel safe and secure there. Students are aware of the high expectation the school community has of them, both with regard to their academic attainment and their behaviour. Of note was students’ competence when speaking Irish and particular credit is due to those who did not complete their primary education through the medium of Irish. Students are encouraged to support one another and there is particular value in projects such as Anamchara which focuses on meeting the pastoral-care needs of first-year students.

It was indicated that the student voice is heard, albeit on an informal or ad hoc basis at present. It is a welcome development that students’ opinions will be sought on the cyberbullying policy and it is recommended that further use be made of the Student Council to give the student voice a more formal status in certain decision-making processes.
Leadership of students

Student welfare is at the core of the school’s work and many supports, both learning and personal, are available to them. Every student is treated as an individual and an effort is made to focus on his/her particular needs. Significant emphasis is placed on the class-teacher system for general monitoring of students and for making appropriate interventions where necessary. Students can access further advice and guidance from the guidance counsellor. Year-heads meet once a week as part of the assistant principals’ meeting and student care is among the topics discussed. Considering the other management responsibilities borne by assistant principals, it would be worthwhile to establish a pastoral-care team which would be responsible for the co-ordination of student care. Once established, this team should develop the Whole-School Guidance Plan as well as clarifying the school’s current pastoral-care provision. Development priorities should also be identified and an action plan formulated to ensure realisation of clearly-stated objectives.

There is a good choice of subjects for students. Many of the subjects provided were traditionally known as academic subjects. While senior management intimated that they would like to offer more practical subjects, resources will not allow for this in the foreseeable future. However, the transition-year course enables students to experience an alternative way of learning and they develop many practical skills during that year. Questionnaires, distributed to parents and students as part of the evaluation, identified scope for improvement with regard to students’ social and personal development. Given that there are sufficient teachers in the school with the appropriate qualifications, the school timetable should be reviewed to ensure it is supportive of this particular aspect of students’ education. The requirements specified in circular M11/03 concerning provision of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) should be met in full.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification. However, school practice is not fully compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures and it is strongly recommended that management address this issue as a matter of urgency.

1.3 Management of facilities

Operating in the school’s separate buildings involves a number of challenges. The extensive use of prefabricated rooms arises from the increase in student numbers. The main complaint voiced by the school community is the lack of a roofed assembly-area where students can gather at lunchtime. Although the Parents’ Association intends to provide a sheltered space in the school yard, this is not a long-term solution. Another cause for concern is the fact that visitors have to drive their cars through the school yard. Despite all the obstacles which arise from the layout of the school, an effort has been made to create a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms. Furthermore, a high-quality ICT network has been developed, and this has considerably enhanced the teaching and learning experience.
2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching varied in the lessons observed. Very good practice was observed in many classes, with some examples of excellent practice. In some classes, the practice was quite adequate, although areas for improvement were identified. There was significant scope for improvement in a small number of classes.

All teachers had prepared for their lessons, in so far as they had given thought to the lesson activities. Frequently, extra resources had been prepared to support learning. Best practice was observed when teachers had reflected on the learning outcomes and shared these with students at the outset. Nonetheless, there was a need to differentiate planned learning activities so that students of high ability could be appropriately challenged.

The vast majority of lessons were well paced. Suitable teaching approaches were used in most cases. Teachers often built on students’ prior knowledge to encourage discussion and to develop lesson content. Many teachers welcomed students’ input and praised them for their efforts. However, in some lessons few opportunities were created for active learning and it is therefore recommended that, in these cases, more extensive use be made of cooperative-learning tasks to ensure a greater balance between the teacher’s voice and that of the students.

Irish is the language of the school and it was spoken, as appropriate, in all classes. Although teachers’ proficiency in spoken Irish varied, all of them ensured that Irish alone was spoken by students. The emphasis on improving the accuracy of students’ Irish is commended and this is a good foundation for the work to be done as part of the school’s literacy strategy.

The assessment and reporting system ensures that the students themselves, as well as their teachers and their parents, are aware of the progress they make. ICT developments greatly enhance the quality of the reporting.

In those classes where practice was of a very high quality, there was a greater emphasis on assessment during the lesson. In these cases, effective questioning techniques were used to assess students’ understanding of lesson content. It was in these cases that the progress made by individual students was most evident to the teacher and to the student him/herself. However, more extensive use could be made of differentiated questioning to ensure that students of higher ability are appropriately challenged.

Examples of students’ written work were reviewed. Copybooks gave a good indication of work done. The regularity of the monitoring of this work varied, as did the type of feedback given to students on the standard of their work. It would be worth making greater use of correction strategies which give students guidance on improving their work and which encourage them to consider for themselves how they are learning.

ICT resources and other stimulating materials were widely used. Visual resources helped to create a link between the lesson content and the students’ own lives. It was good to see examples of students’ work on display in some classrooms. It would also be helpful if more charts with reference material for students were displayed.

There was an atmosphere of courtesy and collaboration in classes. In most cases, students undertook lesson activities eagerly and diligently. Learning outcomes were most worthwhile where student participation in a range of activities consolidated learning. Such
practice was further enhanced when there was a blend of both individual and collaborative tasks.

Some teachers displayed high expectations for their students. In these cases, high levels of self-motivation and student responsibility for learning were evident, both when students worked individually or collaboratively. It was evident, also, that they were accustomed to self-assessment and to discerning from their own work where there was room for improvement.

It is recommended that ways of developing students’ ability to ‘learn how to learn’ be explored at a whole-school level, so that they could review the standard of their own work and consider how it might be improved.

There was a worthwhile learning outcome at the conclusion of almost all lessons. Students displayed good subject-relevant knowledge as well as ability with regard to relevant skills. Students of this school are highly successful, not only in academic achievement, but in the many extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in which they take part. The results from questionnaires distributed to parents and to the students themselves support this observation.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Significant progress has been made with regard to the implementation of some of the recommendations made. The development of the school’s ICT resources is of particular note. Furthermore, the development of both staff and students’ competence in Irish has been identified as a priority by staff-members and strategies are being developed to explore this issue. However, it remains necessary, to further develop the Whole-School Guidance Plan, as already alluded to in this report.

3.2 Learning and Teaching

Some progress has been made in implementing recommendations regarding learning and teaching. The aim of the lesson was frequently shared with students at the outset and it was intimated that greater attention is being paid to classroom practice as part of department planning. It is good that some of the recommendations made were extended to other subject departments.

The implementation of recommendations was more effective in those instances when senior and middle management had given priority to them. In these cases, individual staff-members were nominated to oversee the implementation of recommendations on a whole-school basis. It would be consistent with good practice if the board of management of the school were to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of inspection evaluations.
4. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The school community is committed to providing a worthwhile learning experience for its students. In addition, staff-members are accustomed to working together and to integrating new strategies into their normal classroom practice. However, for self-evaluation processes to be effective, school-development planning will have to be more firmly embedded. This is required so development priorities can be identified and action taken accordingly. It is important also that the school managers play an appropriate part in any improvement process.

The board of management of the school 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.

Published June 2013
Appendix

School Response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
This is a translation of the school response which was submitted in Irish

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Gaelachas Teoranta welcomes this positive WSE-MLL report. Board members are very pleased that the Inspectorate has acknowledged the ongoing excellent work that has taken place, and continues to take place, in Coláiste an Phiarsaigh under the direction of Gaelachas Teoranta, for the past 40 years.

The board is particularly proud that recognition has been given by the inspectorate to:

- the very high levels of care for students
- the high expectations held by the whole-school community
- the high standards of teaching and learning attained
- the high standard of Irish spoken in the school
- the openness of the teaching staff to the practice of continuous improvement
- the pride, enterprise, self-motivation and leadership that staff bring to their work
- the school’s ICT innovation
- the welcoming, positive and courteous atmosphere that exists in the school
- the high quality work being carried out by senior management
- the high academic standards being achieved

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

The board wishes to confirm that many of the recommendations mentioned in the report have already been implemented and that it is planned to implement the other recommendations, in so far as is possible. A timetable has now been laid out that envisages this completed by the end of the first term of the 2013–14 school year.

- As the Inspectorate is aware, discussions have been taking place for some time, under the direction of Gaelachas Teo., with regard to the establishment of a structure that would allow for the transfer of appropriate management roles and responsibilities from Gaelachas Teo. to a board of Coláiste an Phiarsaigh.

- Despite cutbacks, it has been arranged that provision for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) will be increased for the school year 2013-14. The appropriate staffing resources have been made available.

- Matters relating to “Child-protection procedures” have been addressed and we are satisfied that we are adhering in full to the national guidelines.

- Plans have been made to collate a Whole-School Guidance Plan during the year 2013-14.

- A formal system for the review of school policies will be effective from August 2013 onwards.
• Development priorities have been identified – eg. *Líthearthacht na Gaeilge*, *Self-evaluation* – and are currently being explored.