

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Ainm na scoile / School name	Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk
Seoladh na scoile / School address	Mounthawk, Tralee, Co. Kerry
Uimhir rolla / Roll number	68070E

Date of Evaluation: 26-09-2019



**An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna**
Department of
Education and Skills

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION – MANAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning reports on the quality of teaching and learning and on the quality of management and leadership in a school. It affirms good practice and makes recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of educational provision in the school.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. Quality of school leadership and management
2. Quality of teaching and learning
3. Implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations
4. The school's self-evaluation process and capacity for school improvement

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

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.

CHILD PROTECTION

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection procedures were conducted:

1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.
4. The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017.
5. The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools 2017.
6. The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2017
7. School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE, Wellbeing).
8. Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION – MANAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Dates of inspection	24 – 26 September 2019
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meeting with Board of Management• Meetings with principal and deputy principals• Meetings with key staff• Review of relevant documents• Student focus-group interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meeting with parents• Analysis of parent, student and teacher questionnaires• Observation of teaching and learning• Examination of students' work• Interaction with students• Feedback to senior management team, board of management and teachers

School context

Mercy Secondary School, Mounthawk is a co-educational voluntary secondary school, serving the town of Tralee and surrounding hinterland. It operates under the trusteeship of Catholic Education An Irish Schools' Trust (CEIST). The school offers a comprehensive range of programmes including the Junior Cycle, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate (Established) (LCE). It has a current enrolment of 1276 students.

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- The overall quality of school leadership and management is excellent; the board and senior management unite to provide highly effective leadership that is consistently focused on improving student outcomes and experience.
- The senior management team leads by example and, in tandem with the staff, has established a culture of collaboration, improvement, innovation and creativity which permeates the school community.
- Relationships are very positive and bring to fruition the key value of partnership that is enshrined in the school's ethos and mission statement.
- Overall, the quality of teaching and learning is very good with some outstanding teaching observed; opportunities exist to enhance the impact of collaborative learning strategies.
- The school has made very good progress in relation to the implementation of previous recommendations.
- The schools engagement in the school self-evaluation (SSE) process has been highly effective and the school has an outstanding capacity for ongoing improvement. A focus on the use of improvement processes to further develop pedagogical practice and enhance student learning would now be of benefit.

Recommendations

- Teachers should explore how collaborative strategies could be more effectively used to further develop students' key skills and to maximise the learning potential of all planned activities.

- Elements of SSE relating to the enhancement of students' learning experience in the classroom should be more tightly focused on pedagogical strategies that, in the long term, are actionable at whole-school level.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The overall quality of school leadership and management is excellent. Senior management, supported by the board and in partnership with the staff, unite to provide highly effective leadership focused on the building of sustainable systems and structures that promote devolved responsibility and exemplary teamwork. Senior management is consistently focused on improving student outcomes and experience.

Leading learning and teaching

The quality of leading learning and teaching is excellent. The principal and three deputy principals form a very strong team and are providing highly effective leadership for the school community. As a team, they actively seek advice and input from a wide range of stakeholders and agencies, in order to support the decision-making process. This process of consulting, acting, reflecting, learning and reviewing, as exemplified by the senior management team, is very strongly embedded in the culture of the school. Consequently, the senior management team leads by example and, in tandem with the staff, has established a culture of collaboration, improvement, innovation and creativity which permeates the school community.

The school provides a very broad curriculum that is guided by student need. Management consistently seeks to anticipate future needs, as evidenced in the provision of a wide range of short courses at Junior Cycle and the use of digital technologies to monitor these courses.

There is a well-designed TY programme with a wide range of initiatives. Very positively, TY students are being supported to identify short, medium and long term goals and the extent to which TY can help them achieve some of these goals. In addition, students reported that they felt TY was building their confidence, skills and self-esteem.

Teaching and learning about wellbeing is prioritised across junior and senior cycles. It includes appropriate provision of social, personal and health education (SPHE) and relationships and sexuality education (RSE). The programs are responsive to student needs and students speak favourably about their learning in these areas.

Very sound planning principles underpin the school timetable with significant efforts made to overcome the constraints placed on it due to the current specification of the building. In recent years, the use of team-teaching has been extended with a large proportion of it incorporated into provision for first-year classes. The school has an emerging vision for how team-teaching can be used to support the needs of students at an early stage in their post-primary experience, so that they are enabled, in the longer term, to become more independent learners. Very positive experiences in relation to this addition were reported by teachers and students alike.

The school has very good structures in place to help students manage the transition from primary school. In addition to the usual links with primary schools, the school provides relevant subject teachers with access to each students' Education Passport, students meet with their class tutor every morning, and systems are in place to encourage attendance at the many lunchtime clubs in operation in the school.

Very effective and innovative care structures have been established and staff are very cognisant of the impact they can have on student wellbeing. The recent move to a year team structure is very positive. A weekly meeting is timetabled for each year team, meaning early intervention is possible. Because of the composition of the team, interventions happen quickly to support best student outcomes. Parents spoke very highly about accessibility to key personnel and the speed of response once any issue was brought to their attention. The year team, through the assistant year head, has links to the goals set in the school improvement plan for attendance, and significant improvements have been brought about with targeted groups in this area.

The school has taken an innovative approach to the coordination of support for students with special educational needs (SEN). A member of the SEN team is assigned to each year group. An overview of provision is maintained through a weekly SEN team meeting which all members of this core group attend. This creative and effective approach, which is grounded in the very positive relationships between the members, allows for ongoing upskilling in the role as the SEN team member moves with their year group. Subject teachers have access to the relevant SEN information through the school's digital system, which uses the continuum of support to identify student need. The type and level of support is informed by student-centred planning and very good co-ordination is evident.

The school regularly provides placements for student teachers. Trained mentors are in place to support these student teachers and all parties derive professional benefit from this arrangement.

Managing the organisation

The board of management is very committed to the school and is very supportive of the work of the senior management team and the staff of the school. It functions at a very high level. The management and review of policies is a key strength. The ethos as a lived experience for the students is a guiding principle in the making of decisions, and the holistic development of the student, is also of great importance. Members of the board have significant levels of experience in areas that are of great benefit to the school. The board is kept very well informed by senior management which allows it to have strategic oversight of the development of the school and decisions made are evidence based.

The school has a very comprehensive code of behaviour, which includes both a ladder of reward and a ladder of referral. This code is very well understood by all stakeholders in the school community, as seen in the results of a questionnaire distributed during the evaluation.

School improvement plans for six key areas are in place and these are constantly monitored through a well-embedded cycle of consultation, action, reflection, learning and review. The plans have been linked to the *Looking at Our School 2016* document, and articulate a very clear vision, with associated strategies, for the development of the school over the coming years.

Communication across the school community is excellent. A school app is used for day-to-day communications to parents and students. Very high-quality newsletters and yearbooks paint a picture of a joyful and vibrant school community, while letters home communicate the school's purpose and vision. Some aspects of the school website need updating.

The management of school facilities is outstanding. There is great pride in the school as seen through the very high standard of maintenance across all aspects of the school site, which includes a recently constructed polytunnel and a biodiversity area. Artworks include pieces created with the students through an artist-in-residence programme and greatly enhance the environment. The move

to teacher-based classrooms means classroom environments are welcoming and useful to students. Very good work has been done in relation to Health and Safety.

Significant effort is put into ensuring that the current facilities are being used as efficiently as possible, especially in relation to the use of practical rooms, but the constraints in the availability and size of these rooms is impacting student experience. Prior to entry into first year, students may only choose two of the three technical subjects available. In addition, despite proactive management, there is restricted movement in the corridors during break time. The board of management is keenly aware of the constraints and has advanced plans in place that would address these issues.

Leading school development

Leadership of school development is excellent. Management, in partnership with an enthusiastic and vibrant staff, have created an environment where systems and structures are designed to be sustainable, through the building of quality relationships based on respect and the enabling of individuals' to take ownership of their respective roles.

The school has identified six areas for school improvement and has detailed plans in place to improve the learning experience of students in the school, which are progressed through a self-evaluation process. These plans relate to attendance, assessment and learning, wellbeing and capturing the student voice, literacy, digital learning, and special educational needs. Additionally, members of staff have undertaken training in the area of student formation, which relates to how the core values of the school as a faith community can be made relevant and meaningful to students' lives. At this point, it would be beneficial for the school community to consider what aspects of student development underpin all of these plans, so that this extensive change process can be guided by an overarching vision.

Very effective staff committees and teams operate in other areas of school life, in addition to the six areas outlined above. Senior management understands the importance of re-visiting key aspects of continuous professional development (CPD) so that strategies are further embedded as understanding grows and develops. The focus for CPD originates in consultation with staff and seeks to balance local needs and national initiatives. It is positive that staff contribute and participate in a carousel model of CPD delivered by the teachers themselves which means expertise in the school is shared and developed on an ongoing basis.

A highly effective parents' council exists. The board sees the parents' council's role as an "invitation to extend leadership". The association has a very strong relationship with senior management. The work of the association is characterised by a very high degree of commitment and enthusiasm and it is leading many comprehensive activities that add value to students' experiences in the school. Parents speak very positively about the willingness of management to listen to new ideas.

Developing leadership capacity

The board and senior management team unite to provide highly effective leadership focused on the building of sustainable systems and structures that promote devolved responsibility and exemplary teamwork. There is a focus on identifying teachers' strengths and interests and providing opportunities for them to take the lead in these areas. Teachers are encouraged to build a personal vision for their role which is supported with high-quality training.

Staff are to be very highly commended for the breadth of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that genuinely offer “something for everyone”, and this strength of the school was highlighted by students. Students are enabled to develop leadership capacity through this extensive range of activities, along with their very successful participation in local and national competitions and initiatives. The school values the skills its students can develop and use to enhance the community it serves. This sense of being a school of the community is strengthened by very strong links with industry, businesses and organisations throughout the region.

The school has remodelled the student council and taken an innovative approach to how the council works. Three teams on the council now work in the key areas of wellbeing, of ecology and recycling, and social integration. The council is cognisant of the need to raise the profile of the role the student council plays as a voice for change for all students, and it has plans in place to work on this in the current school year.

2. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning is very good overall, with some outstanding teaching observed. Opportunities exist to enhance the impact of collaborative learning strategies.

Learner outcomes and experiences

Learner outcomes and experiences are of a very good quality. High expectations for students’ learning were evident in most lessons and students generally achieved related outcomes. Students demonstrated very good levels of knowledge and understanding of previously explored subject matter.

There was a palpable sincerity in all interactions between teachers and students. Exchanges were firmly rooted in a strong sense of both mutual appreciation and respect. Equally, in working with one another, students demonstrated good levels of co-operation and collegiality, and an openness to learning from each other. It was clear that students were used to, and therefore comfortable with, being asked to work in pairs or small groups. At times, teachers’ enthusiasm for their subject had a clearly motivating effect on students.

Students were enabled to be active in their learning in almost all lessons. Best practice was observed where such opportunities were characterised by appropriate levels of variation and challenge throughout the lesson. On a few occasions, teachers assigned differentiated tasks to students or had students participate in a universally designed task, which meant all students could access the learning at an appropriate level and pace. This very positive practice is further encouraged.

In subject areas where the development of students’ practical capacities and skills is a significant feature of teaching and learning, students demonstrated independence, confidence, and competence in terms of both organising for the task at hand and completing required work.

For the most part, students were comfortable in asking questions, offering opinions, and risking incorrect responses. This can be directly attributed to the safe environment that teachers are fostering and students were appropriately encouraged, acknowledged and affirmed in their learning. At times, further attention on the part of teachers towards those students who were less inclined to contribute could have been of benefit.

In the majority of lessons, co-operative learning was facilitated. Related activities were well organised, but at times they could have been managed more effectively. As a result, the quality of

related student outcomes varied. Excellent practice and outcomes were observed when teachers shared the rationale for collaborative work with students and explicitly shared the related criteria for success. This sharing was followed by close teacher-monitoring of the quality of student outcomes, with individual feedback. Then, at whole-class level, teachers offered monitoring-informed prompts that usually clarified any misconceptions, followed by inclusive whole-class processing and logging of agreed learning. Taken as a whole, these approaches were highly effective in terms of scaffolding students' participation and ensuring the best learning outcome. The further exploration of collaborative learning is recommended through a lens of maximising the learning potential of all planned activities.

The incorporation of self-assessment and peer-assessment in some lessons supported students in reflecting on learning and identifying areas for improvement. This merits more widespread use and is supported by the school improvement plan relating to formative assessment.

Teachers' individual and collective practice

Teacher's individual and collective practice is of a very high quality. The level of preparation for lessons was of a consistently high quality, with clear classroom routines evident. Teachers had prepared and selected a wide variety of highly appropriate resource materials which fostered good to very good levels of engagement, participation and learning.

Learning intentions were grounded in action verbs that linked to student participation and learning. Best practice in this regard, and as observed in many lessons, was when equal emphasis was given to the knowledge, understanding, skills and, as appropriate, values, that would be developed over the course of the lesson and this was explicitly shared with the students.

On occasion, there was a tendency to seek to cover too much content in lessons and this resulted in an inadequate amount of time for in-depth, student engagement with assigned tasks. Consequently, teachers are encouraged to consider the value in covering less content in order to allow for greater student discussion and whole-class processing of tasks.

On a very small number of occasions it was advised that teachers should seek to provide for a better balance between teacher input and student input. This could be addressed by allowing more planned-for student-student interactions, with space and time given for students to formulate, debate and justify their responses.

Very effective use of digital technologies was observed in a number of lessons. Teachers also provide students with access to an electronic learning platform that extends learning outside of class time. It is very positive that the school has engaged with another electronic platform to assist the development of formative assessment practices and has plans in place to encourage the more widespread use of this and other relevant digital-based systems.

A common positive finding across lessons was teachers' work to promote and support students' personal and holistic development. This was characterised by teaching that extended beyond the subject and the topic and that was designed to inspire, motivate, develop self-confidence and instil values.

Subject planning is well-embedded and in the process of becoming digitised, enabling schemes of work to be reviewed and modified as experience is gained. Very high levels of teacher collaboration are evident.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Overall, implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations is very good.

Leadership and management

A key recommendation from the previous whole-school evaluation, which related to the restructuring of 2nd year and 3rd year class groupings, is in the process of being addressed, having started with the introduction of the new junior cycle curriculum. Substantial progress has already been made in this regard. The school should be cognisant of managing perceptions among students that may still be present regarding the older, more streamed structure that was in place previously, given that current junior cycle students are now having different experiences in comparison to their senior cycle counterparts.

The school is strongly encouraged to continue to make efforts to reduce the number of teachers involved in the provision of support for students with SEN, to avoid any fragmentation or impact on the quality of provision as highlighted in a previous recommendation.

Teaching and learning

Recommendations relating to teaching and learning have been responded to and acted on, as evidenced in subject department plans reviewed during the evaluation and through a number of whole-school initiatives.

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

The school's engagement in the school self-evaluation (SSE) process has been highly effective and the school has an outstanding capacity for ongoing improvement, with a proven track record in this area. It very effectively utilises self-evaluation as a process in all areas of school life and especially in the school's six improvement plans. These plans detail all aspects of the current goals for the school and include the goals of SSE, as related to developing classroom practice at whole-school level. A welcome addition to this planning is that all subject departments are now engaged in developing their own subject-specific SSE process, focused on the achievement of the whole-school SSE goals.

To support the contributions of subject departments, it is recommended that the school should review and modify its planning process. This should be undertaken so that the aspects of SSE at whole-school level that are directly linked to improving and enhancing student experiences and outcomes in the classroom are more clearly defined and more easily actionable at classroom level. A greater level of commonality between strategies at subject department level, more tightly focused on pedagogy, would assist this process. This would maximise the impact of the efforts being made in this area and bring a coherence to classroom approaches that could be, in the long-term, sustainably implemented and embedded.

The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	<i>Very good</i> applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is <i>outstanding</i> and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	<i>Good</i> applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	<i>Satisfactory</i> applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	<i>Fair</i> applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	<i>Weak</i> applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Mercy Mounthawk welcomes this WSE-MLL report and congratulates all stakeholders for their hard work and steadfast commitment, acknowledged and validated so favourably throughout the report.

The Board particularly notes the following findings:

- Mounthawk fully complies in all matters relating to child protection procedures.
- The principal and three deputy principals form a very strong team and provide by their example highly effective leadership with the process of consulting, reflecting and reviewing strongly embedded.
- Teaching and learning is of a very high quality and staff are rightly commended for the breadth of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that genuinely offer 'something for everyone' as reflected in the joyful school Newsletters. The Board recognises extraordinary levels of staff volunteerism. It is this which delivers the students' holistic experience.
- It was evident that the Mercy ethos is a lived experience for students and a guiding principle in action. The value of partnership is reflected in the exemplary teamwork and excellent communications across the whole school community. There is a highly effective parents' council and an innovative approach to how the student council works.

Part B Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

Mercy Mounthawk's self-evaluation process is highly effective, with outstanding capacity for ongoing improvement. We will continue the six aspects of the current SSE plan as the basis for our developmental work; these provide the context to engage with the inspection recommendations.

As recognised in the report, Mounthawk will progress the initiative on student formation as one aspect of realising the vision for education within the Mercy tradition. We will further implement our vision of student development and formation in practical terms that link with the teaching, learning and wellbeing agendas through the skill sets and statements of learning as currently provided by the DES. This process will guide the implementation of our school's educational vision, in terms of everyday common practice within and without classroom, by connecting and integrating national and local ethos agendas in staff practice.

In response to the recommendation on developing collaboration, we have restructured this year's Forbairt project to focus on 'exploration of collaborative learning ... through a lens of maximising the learning potential of all planned activities.' This initial project will provide the basis for the next cycle of whole school collaboration, where we establish greater "commonality between strategies at subject department level", facilitating "coherence in classroom approaches" as the report recommends, particularly in relation to "monitoring-informed prompts" and "whole class processing and logging of agreed learning".

The above project coheres with our SIP on Assessment and Learning, in which we are utilising the NCCA process to review our policy. As recommended, we will explore the further use of student self-assessment and peer-assessment within this context of formative assessment.

We appreciate the report's recognition that "management of school facilities is outstanding", while noting that, "despite being used as efficiently as possible", timetabling is constrained by the current specification of the building, in particular in practical subjects. Having completed Phase I of the school development project in 2016 (with tremendous DES and local community support), the Board is now progressing plans to address curricular provision in practical subjects, in order to ensure the fullest choice and access to subject options for students in the Tralee catchment area. The Board looks forward to engaging with the relevant DES authorities to bring to fruition the plans for Phase 2 of the school extension to provide the optimum facilities.