

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Athlone Community College
Athlone, County Westmeath
Roll number: 71410T**

Date of inspection: 26 September 2013



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September, 2013 in Athlone Community College. 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 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.

Introduction

Athlone Community College is a large co-educational, non-denominational school operating under the aegis of Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB). Its enrolment includes students from across all ability ranges and diverse social backgrounds. The school offers a very broad curriculum and a wide range of curricular programmes: Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The management structures in the school are very good.
- The senior management team work well together to ensure the very efficient running of the school.
- The middle management structure is effective and the posts of responsibility are aligned appropriately to the school's needs and priorities.
- Participation in the voluntary programme of leadership development provides teachers with excellent opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills.
- Dedication and commitment to excellence on the part of the board of management, the senior management and staff are evident in the school.
- Student support and care are very good.
- The school offers a very broad and balanced curriculum for all its students.
- There is a very wide range of co-curricular activities on offer in the school.
- In junior cycle student class groups are formed on the basis of a variety of criteria as outlined in the body of this report.
- The quality of teaching and learning is very good in the school.
- The school has an effective school self-evaluation process.

Recommendations for Further Development

- It is recommended that the board and the senior management team continue to build on the positive dimensions of school culture, collegiality and communication among staff and take specific action to improve working relationships between the senior management team and staff where necessary.
- The anomalies in timetabling as outlined in the body of this report should be addressed as soon as possible and the senior management team should consider ways in which it can provide greater oversight of and support for the timetabling function in the school.

- The current arrangements for assigning students to classes and subject levels in junior cycle should be reviewed to achieve much greater opportunity for all students to learn in mixed ability groups. Reflecting the diversity of the student population, this revision would help to promote inclusion and would align very positively with the school's equality and integration policies.
- It is recommended that a whole-school approach to strategies associated with assessment for learning (AfL) be adopted by all teachers with a focus on improving the learning experiences and outcomes for all students.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The management structures in the school are very good. The patron of the school, the Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB), is supportive of the school. The board of management is properly constituted and the board's commitment to the development of the school is very evident.

The current board is in its fifth year of operation. It is recommended that the board follow the guidelines in the "Handbook for Vocational Education Committees and Boards of Management of Schools and Community Colleges" regarding a three-year term of office, the number of meetings that take place in a year and the termination of membership of the board in circumstances of non-attendance at meetings.

The board is compliant with relevant legislation and in line with best practice publishes an annual report on its operation. To strengthen communication with other stakeholders in the management structure of the school it is suggested that the board meet with members of the middle management team and the student council on an annual basis.

The board has adopted a wide range of policies and systematic procedures for review of policies are in place. The board's most immediate priority is the move to a new school campus in April 2014. The board has other important priorities such as the development of the curriculum, e-learning and a focus on teaching and learning, school self-evaluation and literacy and numeracy.

Partnership with parents is important in the school. There is a well-established parents' association which takes an active role in school life. Representatives of the association stated that they were very happy with the quality of education provided by the school, and with the strong links they have with senior management.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal have clearly defined roles. They work closely together on a partnership basis and manage and run the school effectively on a day to day basis. This is borne out by parent questionnaire results which indicate that 90% of parents agree or strongly agree that the school is well run. The principal and deputy principal provide effective leadership for learning.

There are good structures to facilitate communication with staff. An openness to delegating responsibility to members of staff is evident in the practice whereby teachers are invited to lead discussions at staff meetings. Further opportunities for staff to take leadership roles should be facilitated.

Leadership roles are distributed at middle management level and post holders are enabled to make a significant contribution to the effective running of the school. Most posts of responsibility are reviewed very regularly. The posts are aligned to the needs of the school. The consultative process by which post holders are assigned to posts by senior management would benefit from being reviewed.

The establishment by the principal of a Leadership Development Programme, in which staff who are not post holders can participate in management and leadership roles, is an example of excellent practice. The staff involved are gaining valuable leadership experience and are highly commended for the significant input that they make to the management of the school.

There is a strong culture of effective school development planning in the school. Continuous professional development (CPD) has been provided for the whole staff on a range of important issues. To build on this there is a need now for senior management to consult with staff on an audit of the CPD needs of individual teachers involved in the delivery of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), TY, LCA and other subjects or programmes. The primary purpose of the CPD audit should be to establish priorities for staff development, and to ensure that the teachers' professional competences are further developed for the benefit of the students.

The board, senior management and teaching staff show commitment and dedication to excellence in providing a high quality education for the students. A collegial atmosphere among the teaching staff was evident in the course of the evaluation and many teachers stated that there is a mutually supportive culture among the teaching staff. However, there is some evidence that working relationships between some of the teaching staff and the senior management team require attention. In that regard, it is recommended that the board and the senior management team continue to build on the positive dimensions of school culture, collegiality and communication among staff and take specific action to improve working relationships where necessary.

The school's admission policy is inclusive and has due regard to the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion of all students. The school has an integration policy which is due for review this year. It is recommended that this review include an audit of participation of students of nationalities other than Irish in all aspects of school life. The management of students was observed to be excellent in the course of inspection. The school makes very good efforts to promote positive student behaviour and has a clearly structured code of behaviour. When the code of behaviour is reviewed it should be done so in line with the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) document 'Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools'.

The student support system in the school is very good. A student care team is in place and strong links exist between this team, senior management, year heads and tutors to ensure a holistic approach. The book rental scheme, breakfast and homework clubs are examples of good supports that are provided. The results of parents' questionnaires indicate that 94% of parents agree or strongly agree that their child feels cared for in the school.

Guidance is provided to all LCA and TY students and this is very good. The provision of guidance to the majority of senior cycle students is delivered by means of individual student meetings with the guidance counsellor. It is suggested that this method of providing guidance be reviewed. Consideration could be given, within the available guidance resources, to a slightly different blend of provision for students which might include general guidance information and support in a group setting with access to individual support as necessary. SPHE is provided in all junior cycle classes. It is noted that there has

been a significant change of personnel in the SPHE teaching team this year. It is recommended that such changes in personnel be kept to a minimum and a core team of teachers with expertise in the delivery of SPHE be established.

Learning support and a large allocation of resource hours are provided to the school. The most prevalent method of supporting students with additional learning needs is by withdrawal of students and small class teaching. There are a total of 31 teachers involved in this support system. The involvement of such a large number of teachers tends to lead to a fragmented system of support for students. It is suggested that a small core team be established, and that in the main, teachers with expertise and interest in the area be assigned to support the students with additional educational needs.

A student council is in place and to date has played a role in school activities such as open night and anti-bullying week. At the focus group meeting with inspectors, it emerged that not all students were aware of the existence of the student council. Student questionnaires revealed that only 31% of students agree or strongly agree that they have a say in how to make the school a better place. It is recommended that strategies be established to strengthen the council's role in the school. Training for the liaison teacher and the council should be facilitated as soon as possible.

The school is highly commended for providing a very broad curriculum and a wide range of subjects and programmes. Students have access to a very wide range of opportunities to develop their own leadership skills. Students take on roles as mentors, class captains and prefects. Many students also participate in competitions. The school has an excellent range of co-curricular activities including many sports, debating, Green Schools, school musical, cultural outings and trips. This has a significant impact on broadening and enriching the students' learning experience in the school.

A number of issues regarding timetabling arose in the course of the inspection. At the time of the evaluation a mismatch between the electronic and hard copy versions was evident. The electronic version did not accurately reflect the day to day functioning of the deployment of staff resources in particular in relation to resource hours. The hard copy also contained a number of inaccuracies. These timetabling issues need to be addressed. Regarding the scheduling of lessons, modern languages are scheduled last or second last class in the day in three out of the four lessons for all first years. Circular 0025/2012 recommends daily access to English for all junior cycle classes. However, the school is currently not providing this level of English for first years. Amore active engagement by the senior management team in timetabling, will help to ensure the accuracy of the timetable and its alignment with department circulars regarding curriculum provision.

There are aspects of the organisation of students in class groups that are a significant cause for concern. In junior cycle students are assigned to class groups on the basis of a process that includes interviews with parents, meetings with primary school staff, subject choice, student assessments and social competence. However, a consequence of the current assignment arrangement is that students who are of different ethnic origin are unevenly distributed and tend to be concentrated in some class groups rather than others. In the interests of integration it is recommended that the current approach to grouping students be reviewed. The attendance data for the year 2011 - 2012 in relation to the current third-year students shows that students who are in lower bands, as currently organised, miss significantly more days from school, on average, than other students. While it is noted that attendance is very well monitored by teachers and year heads on a daily basis, it is recommended that an attendance strategy be put in place which specifies time bound targets and strategies to reduce poor attendance amongst some students

Students choose their subjects prior to entry into first year and the guidance department is not involved in that process. 32% of parents surveyed disagree or strongly disagree that they received helpful advice when their child was choosing subjects. In light of this and the aforementioned issues in relation to class groupings, ethnic mix, attendance and subject choice, it is recommended that the current arrangements for assigning students to classes and subject levels in junior cycle be reviewed to achieve much greater opportunity for all students to learn in mixed-ability groups. It is also suggested that a short taster programme of optional subjects be provided for all first-year students. While every effort is made to accommodate students' first choices of optional subjects, some subjects are oversubscribed, as is the case with Art. For example, it was noted that no first-year students from the two class groups in the lowest band were studying Art at the time of the evaluation. Such anomalies need to be addressed urgently.

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 accommodation comprises some temporary accommodation in addition to the original school building. All the accommodation is very well maintained. Management is to be commended for prioritising the integration of ICT into learning and teaching. Environmental issues are taken seriously in the school. A Green School programme is being implemented and the school has been awarded two Green flags.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Significant efforts have been made by subject teams in the preparation of subject plans, a number of which were reviewed during the evaluation. These plans included long-term programmes of work for each year group and level. Features of very good practice were evident in a number of plans: intended student learning outcomes were documented, the school's literacy and numeracy strategy was tailored to suit individual subjects, and many plans included detailed examination analysis with comparisons to national norms. These features of good practice should be extended to all subject plans. Having completed an analysis of state examination results all subject departments should create an action plan with defined targets for improvement in relation to uptake levels and student attainment.

Teachers had prepared well for the lessons evaluated. In many lessons, the learning intention was clear and shared with students. In addition, as was observed in some lessons, revisiting the learning outcomes at the end of the lesson proved essential in determining the extent of students' progress. Students should be afforded the opportunity to report on and explain their learning more frequently than was observed. This would be very beneficial in the consolidation of learning.

The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good. Overall it was very good. This is borne out by parent questionnaires where 91% agreed or strongly agreed that teaching is good in the school. All lessons were well structured and followed a clear, sequential direction. There was good variety of methodologies in the majority of lessons visited, including full class teaching, group work, the interactive use of ICT, visual displays, student-centred games and practical demonstrations. Good efforts were made to make lessons interesting, relevant and stimulating for students. Questioning strategies were

most effective when they were directed to as wide a range of students as possible and when a mixture of higher-order and lower-order questions was adopted. Particularly good practices were noted when students were encouraged to expand and improve their responses. Very good efforts were made in all lessons to attend to the literacy needs of students. Particularly noteworthy practice was seen where students presented their learning to the class group, thus enhancing their oral literacy skills.

In all lessons, there was a very good rapport between teachers and students. Mutual respect was evident. The learning environment was positive and affirming. Evaluation questionnaires indicate that 90% of the students surveyed agree or strongly agree that teachers encourage them to work to the best of their ability. This was borne out in lesson observation.

Assessment practices varied and mainly included questioning of students by the teacher. Self-assessment and peer-assessment are two further strategies that merit increased use. It is recommended that the strategies of assessment for learning (Afl) be extended on a whole-school basis. The current assessment policy needs to be reviewed and a more detailed whole-school assessment strategy should be put in place.

Appropriate homework is set regularly. Good practice was evident in some students' copybooks where teachers monitored and corrected students' work, and comments outlining strategies for improvement were provided. This good practice should be applied to all students' written materials. Teachers communicated high expectations of learning in all lessons but there is still scope to ensure that more-able students are sufficiently challenged.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The board of management reviews all inspection reports at board meetings and the senior management team engages fully with ensuring that recommendations are implemented. It is recommended that a template be developed for subject departments to fill in with targets showing how and when the recommendations will be implemented. It is suggested that the board receive ongoing updates regarding the progress on the implementation of recommendations.

3.2 Learning and teaching

All subject departments meet to discuss the implementation of the recommendations following a subject inspection. Overall, many of the recommendations have been implemented but there is still scope to increase the use of differentiated methodologies, ICT and AfL strategies as outlined in previous reports. The very good practice of disseminating recommendations across all subject departments is noted.

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

The school's self-evaluation (SSE) process is very good. A committee to establish SSE in the school has been set up and has engaged in very impressive work. Learners, teachers and parents have been surveyed and priorities have been established. A very good SSE report and school improvement plan (SIP) have been completed. This is excellent practice and is highly commended. It is recommended that measurable targets in terms of student attainment in the area of literacy be inserted into the SIP.

The school's capacity for improvement is very good. The school has established its own improvement agenda and has the ability and determination to continually review and improve.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The following is the response of the Board of Management.

The Board in general is extremely pleased with the positive nature of the report and is happy that it affirms the excellent work of management and staff within Athlone Community College.

The Board recognises and is pleased with the following key findings:

1. The management structures in the school are very good.
2. The senior management team work well together to ensure the very efficient running of the school.
3. The middle management structure is effective and the posts of responsibility are aligned appropriately to the school's needs and priorities.
4. Participation in the voluntary programme of leadership development provides teachers with excellent opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills.
5. Dedication and commitment to excellence on the part of the Board of Management, the senior management and staff are evident in the school.
6. Student support and care are very good.
7. The school offers a very broad and balanced curriculum for all its students.
8. There is a very wide range of co-curricular activities on offer in the school.
9. In junior Cycle, student class groups are formed on the basis of a variety of criteria as outlined in the body of this report.
10. The quality of teaching and learning is very good in the school.
11. The school has an effective school self-evaluation process.

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

Recommendation 1: The Board confirms the structures are now in place to build on the positive dimensions of school culture, collegiality and communication between staff and management.

Recommendation 2: The Board confirms that Senior Management is providing and facilitating in-service training and up-skilling in timetabling and that all the necessary oversight and support is consequently available in the school.

Recommendations 3 & 4: Ongoing review is continuing in conjunction with the school self-evaluation process.

Overall, the Board is extremely happy that the excellent work of management and staff in Athlone Community College is recognised in this report.