

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Castlecomer Community School  
Castlecomer, County Kilkenny  
Roll number: 91360T**

**Date of inspection: 14 October 2015**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SKILLS  
INSPECTORATE**

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

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October 2015 in Castlecomer Community School. 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

## ***Introduction***

Established in 1987, Castlecomer Community School is under the joint trusteeship of the Presentation Sisters and the Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board. The current enrolment of 575 students reflects a diverse range of abilities and backgrounds. The school provides the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) as well as an optional Transition Year (TY) and some Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management, senior management and staff are committed to school development and improvement.
- The senior management team is providing good leadership, and middle management structures are good.
- Effective and clearly structured systems are in place to support students in terms of behaviour, pastoral care, and special educational needs.
- The quality of teaching and learning in most lessons was good or very good, but there was scope for a more consistent use of the very good practice observed in individual lessons.
- Subjects departments are collaborating well but there is scope for development in many of the subject plans.
- Several significant school improvement initiatives are being conducted as part of the school self-evaluation (SSE) process and the school has a good capacity to follow through on review and school improvement.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- The board of management should identify more clearly the timeframes, personnel, and resources required to progress its priorities in terms of school development planning.
- With respect to the teaching and learning initiatives underway in the school, the next step should be to reflect, consolidate and ensure that what has been learned is applied consistently in the classroom.

- Subject plans should be developed as working documents with schemes of work based on learning outcomes, resources, and methodologies.
- A more systematic formal review of implementation of the recommendations from inspections should be implemented.
- The next steps in the school improvement initiatives already in place should include the establishment of success criteria in order that progress can be formally reviewed at appropriate intervals.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is very committed to the ongoing development of the school. It is good practice that the members have accessed relevant training. The board expressed its vision for the school as a place where students are cared for and supported to reach their potential. Under the direction of the board, considerable progress has been made in developing the school's infrastructure including the upgrading of sports facilities and the expansion of the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) unit.

Board meetings are held regularly, but it is not routine practice to issue an agreed report. In the interests of consistent communication, the board should issue an agreed report after each meeting. In line with a need identified in a survey of parents, the board should also review how it informs parents on the performance of the school.

The board has well-established practices for review of the ongoing operation of the school and the board provides a high level of support to the senior management team in this regard. The principal reports on current developments and issues at every board meeting, and minutes of the meetings show that issues are carefully considered. It would be worthwhile to supplement this interaction with the school with occasional inputs from relevant staff members. For example, subject departments could be asked to report to the board on the progress of implementing recommendations from inspection reports.

The board has adopted a range of mandatory policies including a code of behaviour and admissions policy. It is good practice that the board has decided to adopt a more systematic review of policies and that it has identified the development of an attendance policy as a priority. In addition to policy development, the board has overseen the development of a number of school development plans. These plans set out in broad terms the priorities and actions to be taken with respect to areas of school life such as enhancing the infrastructure. Considerable progress has been made in addressing many of the identified priorities. However, greater clarity regarding the timeframes, personnel and resources required to implement the development plans would facilitate a more formal review of progress as part of the planning process.

The principal and deputy principal demonstrate a great commitment to the ongoing success and development of the school. While each reserves some areas of school life as their lead responsibility, they operate very much as a team. This team approach stems from their desire to maximise access by staff and students to management as needs arise. Over recent years, they have implemented some significant initiatives, particularly in the area of teaching and learning.

Leadership roles are formally distributed at middle management level with relevant and clearly defined duties assigned to posts of responsibility and to staff with assigned extra

duties. It is very good practice that the schedule of posts is reviewed annually. In addition to posts, staff also contribute through leading projects and participation in various events.

Student leadership is facilitated through the student council and mentoring system. The student council has been reinvigorated in recent years and has taken a proactive approach to involvement in school life. A very good example of this approach is their work on developing the school uniform. Surveys show that the majority of students are proud to be in the school and feel safe and cared for. In order to build on their success to date and raise awareness of their work, further promotional opportunities for the student council should be identified.

The parents' association is very supportive of the school and provides valuable financial support for various initiatives. The attendance of the principal at meetings allows for discussion of general issues and consultation on school policies. A survey of parents showed great satisfaction with the school, with the vast majority feeling that their child is doing well in the school and that their child enjoys school. However, a few areas such as dissatisfaction with the information received on subject choices should be explored.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

The senior management team is committed to excellence and quality improvement and they are leading and implementing a range of professional development initiatives focused on good quality teaching and learning. These school improvement initiatives include peer observation, lesson workshops, class swaps among teachers, themed teaching and professional dialogue with another school. The enthusiasm of staff for participating in this kind of professional development and the vision and motivation provided by senior management is commendable. A survey of teachers showed very high levels of satisfaction with the management and operation of the school.

Teachers are deployed according to their qualifications and are consulted in the framing of the timetable. Regular staff meetings allow all staff members to share their views and be part of the decision-making process. During the evaluation teachers spoke of being empowered by management.

The school provides a broad curriculum with a range of programmes available for all abilities and ages. This is particularly evident in the provision of two ASD classrooms which allows relevant students to access a mix of mainstream and specialist support so that they can participate fully in the school community. In addition, the school has shown a strong commitment to retaining the LCA programme as an option for students. The very popular LCVP and optional TY are well organised. The majority of LCVP students use the results from their link modules for entry to third level. In terms of curriculum development, the potential of introducing a second modern language is being considered by the board. A wide range of extra-curricular activities complements the formal curriculum.

Instructional hours are in compliance with Department circular M2/95 and designated hours are used for their intended purpose. However, the inclusion of study periods for some groups of students should be kept under review and eliminated where at all possible. In line with recommendations in a previous inspection report, the provision of physical education (PE) in senior cycle should be reviewed.

The admissions policy is clear and open with respect to the procedures and criteria applied to the enrolment process. Parents are required to make an annual contribution for necessary items and services. Though some information is provided, it would be useful to provide more detail to parents on what the contribution is used for.

The clearly structured code of behaviour is very well understood by students and parents, and good systems are in place to monitor attendance and punctuality. The development of a student journal to support the implementation of the code of behaviour is a very worthwhile initiative. The so called 'green book' is regularly used to exchange notes with parents, to record absences. It is also used by year heads when reviewing individual students' progress. In addition the 'green book' is used to affirm positive behaviour and to record continuous assessment outcomes. An awards systems also affirms students for their efforts in both curricular and extra-curricular activities. In addition, the continued provision of a behaviour support unit assists some individual students to continue in school by supporting their organisational and behavioural needs.

The student-support structure is well organised and is coordinated by a care team which includes the school chaplain, special educational needs coordinator and behaviour support teacher. The team meets weekly to review progress and decide on actions required in particular cases. Outside professional expertise is provided as necessary for a small number of students. The school has recently appointed a guidance teacher following a short period when the position was vacant. Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes are in place. The caring ethos of the school is reflected in the good satisfaction ratings from students and parents.

The provision for learning support is well organised and meets the needs of students in a variety of ways. The use of a common planning template is a useful means of ensuring consistency and providing an overview of each student's or group's progress.

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 accommodation is maintained to a good standard and there has been considerable enhancement of the facilities in recent years. For example, sports facilities have been upgraded with significant support from parents and the local community.

A wide range of specialist rooms is available and these are well equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) resources. Staff also have access to ICT in the general staff workroom.

Environmental responsibility is promoted through participation in the Green Schools project and in the installation of low-power light fittings. The school has a health and safety statement and fire drills are organised regularly. However, it is recommended that the specific actions taken to address hazards identified in the health and safety statement be recorded and any outstanding actions implemented as soon as possible.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### **2.1 The quality of learning and teaching**

The quality of teaching and learning in most lessons was good or very good. However, there was scope for a more consistent use of the very good practice observed in individual lessons and in a small number of lessons there was room for significant development.

High-quality lesson planning was evident where a structured sequence of learning and assessment activities had been chosen to support learning. In some cases, planning focused more on the delivery of content and there was an insufficient link between the intended learning outcomes and the learning or assessment activities in the lesson. While most lessons had a clear focus, the strategy of explicitly engaging students with the intended learning outcomes was used only in a minority of lessons.

All of the lessons observed were well managed, classroom routines were well established, and a respectful and affirmative rapport was evident between students and teachers. In some classrooms, good use was made of displays of student work and other subject-specific resources. Nearly all rooms were arranged in a traditional format and it is suggested that other arrangements which facilitate group work or peer learning could be explored.

Learning was well supported in lessons where there was active engagement in a variety of tasks such as discussions, group work, written tasks and practical activities. Students responded very well to collaborative exercises. However, in some lessons one methodology such as teacher-led discussion, or an activity such as note taking, took up most of the lesson time.

The skill of 'learning to learn' was developed in some lessons which included peer or self-assessment activities or where assessment criteria were shared with students. The use of continuous assessment and the inclusion of formative comments in the 'green book' are worthwhile initiatives.

Good practice was evident in the commencement of most lessons with a review of prior learning and the correction of homework. An innovative approach used in one lesson was to engage the students in determining the focus of the lesson through examination of some stimulus materials. Brainstorming students' general knowledge of new topics was also a useful technique to engage their interest.

Good assessment techniques tested understanding at different levels as well as testing simple recall of information. Learning was very evident where knowledge and understanding were tested in different ways. In all lessons there was a strong focus on the assignment and correction of homework. At the end of some lessons, students' progress was well assessed. However, in some cases a more in-depth assessment could have been carried out.

Verbal questioning worked best as an assessment technique when an appropriate 'wait time' was allowed before questions were directed to a named student and an extended answer was required. Sometimes very brief or partial responses were accepted, thus missing an opportunity to assess how deep students' learning had been.

Content was communicated effectively in most cases both verbally and through the use of the whiteboard and other resources such as worksheets and the data projector. ICT was well used in some lessons to introduce a visual element or in one case to provide an interactive quiz. However, in many lessons, ICT was not used at all or simply used to present information. More interactive uses of the very good ICT facilities should be explored.

In some lessons, very good attention was given to supporting students' literacy needs. For example, keywords were explained or students were encouraged to use dictionaries. However, there could have been greater or more explicit attention to literacy skills in some lessons.

Some excellent professional development initiatives are underway in the school. However, in light of the comments above, it is recommended that the learning gained from those initiatives be consolidated and steps taken to ensure that it enhances classroom practice more consistently. Consideration should also be given to a student survey which shows that while most students enjoy going to lessons and find them interesting, a significant minority do not agree.

All subject departments engage in subject planning and some good practice was evident in the plans reviewed such as the use of common examinations, and the discussion of whole-school issues and student outcomes at some subject meetings. However, schemes of work were often content based, and most plans did not contain a record of recent meetings. Some aspects of the plans such as methodologies, or the use of ICT, were dealt with briefly or in a generic manner.

In order to strengthen the planning already in place, it is recommended that subject plans be developed as working documents that support improvement in subject provision and classroom practice. For example, schemes of work should provide information on the intended learning outcomes, methodologies, resources, and assessment strategies. Overall student outcomes in certificate examinations are good but records of subject department analysis were inconsistent. Reflection on student outcomes should be conducted annually as part of subject planning in all areas.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

It is clear that good consideration has been given to the implementation of most of the recommendations from previous inspections reports. Many of the recommendations have been implemented. For example, an RSE policy has been developed and is available on the school's website. The special educational needs policy has been reviewed and ratified by the board.

However, based on the information provided by subject departments, the outcome with respect to some recommendations is unclear. It is recommended that a more systematic formal review of implementation of recommendations from inspections be implemented. Recommendations should be shared with all departments, and subject departments could be asked to report to the board of management.

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

Over the past three years a major initiative in school self-evaluation and school improvement has been undertaken in the school. This initiative has been led by management with the assistance of coordinators, and has involved the whole staff in a series of innovative professional development projects such as linking with another school, peer observation and lesson workshops. The initiative commenced with the gathering of evidence through surveys of students, parents and staff. Analysis of the evidence led to the development of a 'teaching and learning charter' which provides a framework for the overall aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Undoubtedly, involvement in these actions has raised the level of professional dialogue among staff and created an awareness of the self-evaluation improvement process. However, the focus to date has been on the initial stages of school self-evaluation. It is recommended that in order to build on the very good work already completed, the next

steps in the school improvement process include a clear setting of success criteria and the formal evaluation of progress at regular intervals. In light of the commitment of senior management and staff, the support of the board of management and the record of actions implemented to date, the school has a good capacity to effect meaningful school improvement.

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