

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Millstreet Community School
Millstreet, County Cork
Roll number: 91390F**

Date of inspection: 5 February 2016



**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 February 2016 in Millstreet 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 accepts the report as the final inspection report available for publication and wished to respond formally to the report. The Board agrees that the response submitted will be included as an appendix to the published report. The board's response is submitted below.

Introduction

Millstreet Community School, founded in 1973, operates under the trusteeship of the Bishop of Kerry, the Presentation Sisters and Cork Education and Training Board. It is a co-educational school of 280 students. It serves a largely rural catchment area and supports a diverse student population. In addition to Junior Certificate and established Leaving Certificate, the school offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Millstreet Community School is a welcoming school with a positive atmosphere. In line with its mission statement it was found to be seeking to promote all aspects of student's growth and development.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management operates effectively.
- The senior management team is cohesive.
- Good working relationships are evident and communication is most effective.
- Teachers respond favourably to the opportunity to manage and lead.
- Subject department planning is of a particularly high quality.
- The management and leadership of students is embraced by all.
- A valuable student-support structure is in place.
- Partnership with parents and students is well developed.
- The school offers a broad curriculum, including a comprehensive programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- Facilities are developed on an ongoing basis and are well maintained.
- Teaching and learning is very good, with much excellent practice observed.
- Review and evaluation are well-established practices.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The role of the board in ensuring compliance and related best practice should be strengthened.
- It is recommended that the post structure be reviewed.
- All key support personnel ought to be facilitated to attend regular meetings.

- A greater percentage of the general allocation should be prioritised for the provision of additional individual guidance and counselling.
- A curriculum review is recommended.
- Favourable consideration ought to be given to the introduction of focused peer observation.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted, and operates effectively. Members are committed, and demonstrate much knowledge and experience in education. Some members have undertaken relevant training. Members demonstrate clarity on the role of a board.

The board meets regularly. Meetings are informed by agendas and minutes are maintained. Minutes indicate that discussions are all encompassing and relevant. Board members value greatly the principal's report. All decisions are based on consensus.

Discussion with members indicated that the board is constant in its efforts to ensure breadth and balance in the curriculum and in the recruitment of quality teachers. It was also clear that the board supports high-quality teaching and learning. It is suggested that the board might propose the introduction of a formal peer-mentoring programme. This would support the further sharing of good practice, while offering a mechanism through which teachers who are experiencing difficulties could be further assisted by colleagues.

The strengths of the school, as identified by the board, were most apparent during the evaluation. Simultaneously, the board demonstrated a keen awareness of the challenges facing the school. It is suggested that the board documents its vision for the medium- to long-term development of the school, which should include the board's plans to address potential or actual challenges.

The board is actively involved in policy development and a relevant schedule of review has been compiled. In the planned review of the code of behaviour, consideration ought to be given to the best practice principles set out in *Developing a Code of Behaviour*, a National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) publication. It is advised that: ratification and review dates be provided on all policies; and Department of Education and Skills templates, sample and related guides, be consulted as relevant. The anti-bullying and health and safety policies should be reviewed annually, and a whole-school guidance plan should be developed. The admissions policy should be revisited with a view to bringing the policy in line with the very good actual practice. Publication of policies on the school website could be further considered.

Consideration should be given to the preparation of an agreed written report following each meeting. Furthermore, the board is required to prepare and circulate an annual report to parents. In line with Section 20 of the Education Act 1998, this should make particular reference to progress in relation to the achievement of priorities, as set out in the school plan. It is suggested that the board strengthens its role in monitoring progress in terms of identified priorities.

To conclude, and with particular reference to findings in section 1.4 of this report, the role of the board in ensuring compliance and related best practice needs to be strengthened.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The senior management team is very cohesive. The principal and deputy principal have a very positive working relationship and an equally favourable one with staff. While both assume individual responsibility for certain areas, it is clear that a strong partnership approach exists. They communicate regularly throughout each day. Both are approachable and accessible, and they consult and collaborate constantly. Senior management avails of the professional development opportunities provided by the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS).

The principles of fairness, inclusion and integrity inform senior management's approach to management and leadership. These are offered, but they are also expected. They are solution focused in their approach to problem solving and flexible in the related management of people and situations. Decision-making is heavily informed by "*the best outcome for the student*".

Communication is very effective. Informal communication is key to much of what happens on a day-to-day basis. This proves effective because: staff are interested and committed; working relationships are mutually respectful; a team approach is valued; and a spirit of collegiality and cooperation prevails. Communication is further supported by management's provision for a number of more formal communication mechanisms, including almost weekly gatherings under hours designated in the Croke Park Agreement .

The senior management team places great significance on the importance of seeking to recruit teachers, and accommodate student teachers, that fit with school culture. An induction programme supports the integration of staff. Senior management is working to enhance teaching and learning. This is most evident in the series of worksheets and reflection activities regularly issued to subject departments.

Senior management has set clear objectives for individual initiatives. It would be valuable for senior management to formally articulate its teaching and learning vision for the school. This should be documented, alongside a corresponding action plan, in the development section of the school plan.

Senior management operates an empowering management style, recognising that real and sustained change and improvement is most effective when peer led. As a result, delegation to all interested parties is facilitated. The tutor system is a fine example of distributed leadership. Teachers described the school as one "*where ideas are valued and encouraged.*" Assistant principals and special duties teachers carry out their assigned duties in an effective, efficient and extremely committed manner. It is recommended, in light of the school's evolving needs and the ever changing, educational landscape, that the post structure be reviewed.

In terms of school development planning, teachers' active participation is facilitated. As a result, the fundamentals of planning are well advanced. Developmental priorities are sought not imposed, and identified priorities inform improvement plans. Consideration ought to be given to the documentation of action planning related to work associated with identified priorities, and that the related action plans be collated to form the developmental section of a school plan. Subject department planning is firmly established, related processes are well embedded, and the documents arising out of this work are of a good quality. Some fine examples of beneficial practice were noted across subject plans. It was suggested to staff that they review the plans of different departments in order to identify additional focal points. As previously referenced, senior management provides valuable templates to guide and focus the work of subject departments.

Staff are encouraged and supported to participate in relevant continuing professional development (CPD). It is suggested, in order to further support the sharing of learning from such events, that staff might consider presenting valuable learning to colleagues. Staff is deployed according to their qualifications and expertise. A significant professional pride was apparent amongst the staff met as part of the evaluation.

Senior management and staff are supported in all they do by a hard-working secretary who provides essential administration, as well as an equally committed ancillary and caretaking team, who maintain a clean, comfortable, safe and aesthetically pleasing environment.

The school has effective admissions, induction and transition procedures. Student management and leadership is embraced by all, but notable players include the class tutors. A corresponding weekly tutor class, facilitated by class tutors, makes a valuable contribution to student management. Leadership of students could be further enhanced through the greater inclusion here of a series of co-ordinated, outcomes-focused activities. A renewed emphasis on the tracking of attendance and punctuality has proved very successful.

A valuable student support and care structure is in place, the bedrock of which is good, often informal, communication. Relevant personnel are referred to a 2014 publication of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), *Student Support Teams in Schools*, against which current practice can be benchmarked and reviewed. There are a number of identifiable key players and key practices. This includes: the deputy principal, who is timetabled to teach all first-year students; the chaplain, who meets all first-year students individually; the guidance counsellor, whose primary role, due to timetabling constraints, is to offer educational and vocational support; and the class tutors, who keep a watchful eye on students. The deputy principal and chaplain have begun to meet weekly to discuss students' needs. It is recommended that all key support and care personnel be facilitated to attend regular, possibly weekly, student support meetings. This meeting ought to include the deputy principal, the guidance counsellor, the chaplain, and the co-ordinator for special educational needs (SEN), as well as tutors, perhaps on a cyclical basis. Referrals to outside agencies are made as required.

The principle of 'respect for all' is seen as significant in terms of supporting and caring. Teacher involvement in extracurricular activity is also recognised as valuable. A 'care for others' mentality is cultivated in students, with the chaplain's input being pivotal in this regard. Extremely positive teacher-student relationships contribute greatly to students' sense of being cared for and supported, and to their positive experience of schooling. Almost daily acknowledgement of students' achievements contributes to students' sense of being supported and valued.

There is a solid programme of work delivered in the area of educational and vocational preparation and guidance. Key players include the guidance counsellor and the LCVP team. The guidance counsellor also provides personal counselling to individual students as needs arise. A greater percentage of the general allocation needs to be prioritised for the provision of individual guidance and counselling, and so consideration ought to be given to a reduction in the class-contact hours of relevant personnel.

Support for students with SEN is well coordinated, with good structures for review and modification of provision. Teachers are informed of the learning needs of students with SEN at the start of the school year and thereafter as necessary. Students' needs are met through individual or small group withdrawal. Further consideration ought to be given to team teaching.

Student leadership is promoted, with a number of examples provided of where students assumed a natural lead. The student council is facilitated to work effectively and the members respond accordingly. There is scope for greater consultation with students around school policies.

Communication with and reporting to parents is well developed. Formal access to parents' voice is facilitated via a monthly meeting between senior management and key parents' association personnel. Parents described the nature of this meeting as informative and consultative. The parents' association is proactive and productive. Members are involved in a range of initiatives designed to support: the organisation and running of events; student learning and student wellbeing. Suggestions as to how membership and attendance at monthly meetings might be increased were offered. It was suggested too that consideration be given to the facilitation of joint parents' association and students' council projects.

The timetable is carefully constructed and demonstrates good planning principles. Mixed-ability classroom settings predominate. The value of providing for the formation of smaller class groups in the core subjects ought to be explored. A broad curriculum and a large range of subjects are provided. A taster programme is provided in both first and transition years, and subject choice systems accommodate good access. The evaluation questionnaire issued to parents suggests that subject choice information evenings should be organised for parents. LCVP and TY programmes are well organised and managed. A comprehensive programme of teacher-led, co-curricular activities supports the formal curriculum. Lunchtime and after-school extracurricular activities, particularly but not exclusively in the area of sport, are provided.

It is recommended that a review of the curriculum be considered in light of: the fact that study periods can not be timetabled; the need to timetable Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for all junior cycle students for one period each week; the required good practice of timetabling Physical Education (PE) in senior cycle; the possible side effects of seeking to maintain a very broad curriculum against a backdrop of reduced allocations; and the inspection team's sense that learning support hours may be being used to support a board curriculum in addition to addressing the specific learning needs of students.

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 board, senior management, and teachers are committed to providing a quality learning and working environment. The building and environs are developed on an ongoing basis. The school is extremely well maintained and is cleaned thoroughly on a daily basis. A distinct characteristic of the facilities is the amount and quality of the artwork, in all forms, that is on display. Classrooms are well equipped in terms of information and communication technology (ICT) and access to the internet is generally good. Provision for specialist subjects is appropriate. The school's health and safety statement should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching in Millstreet Community School is very good, with much excellent practice observed. There was ample evidence of student learning.

Planning and preparation was of a very high quality in almost all lessons. A large range of interesting and relevant resources had been sourced and prepared. Overall, lessons were well structured, paced and pitched. In a very small number of lessons planned work was either too ambitious or not ambitious enough. As relevant, teachers were advised that this should be addressed at planning stage. High-quality subject department planning work is having a clear impact on lesson design.

In the main, the lesson plan was shared with students. Occasionally only lesson content was shared. Best practice was where the shared plan was grounded in a series of learning intentions. This explicitness is further encouraged. The use of students' prior knowledge, which supported their progression to new and higher levels of understanding, was apparent in most lessons. Teachers were keenly conscious of making topics relevant and fun. Much of the time teachers used a developmental approach, both in terms of knowledge acquisition and skill development. Teachers' verbal inputs were of a very high quality in almost all lessons, were well thought out and highly informed. There was explicit and ongoing reference to learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

A highly student-centred pedagogy predominated. In general, a number of activities were provided in lessons, which placed a variety of requirements on students. Students were regularly enabled to work collaboratively, although there was scope for greater provision for this in a very small number of lessons. At times, collaborative tasks were seen to accommodate the five elements of effective cooperative learning: interdependence; accountability; social skills; interaction and reflection. This is a positive finding. A benchmarking of all planned activities against these elements is suggested to teachers, as a means of determining value and impact. Best practice was where student activity was closely monitored, and where teachers used this space to provide differentiated direction and support. This is further encouraged. In almost all instances, there was high quality processing of activities.

Questioning was a key strategy. Good practice included: equal distribution; adequate wait time; and differentiated questioning. The use of confidence building strategies such as, for example, think-pair-share, was also observed.

A number of lessons were revision focused, and these lessons were equally student-centred and active. A high use of target languages was evident in all language lessons. ICT was well utilised to support teaching and enhance learning. By and large, plenaries were very well accommodated, although these were best when they included consideration of planned learning intentions.

Classrooms were wonderfully print-rich. Teachers are encouraged to start experimenting with the physical layout of classrooms. An extremely positive classroom atmosphere predominated. It felt safe and secure, but also challenging. Students' contributions were encouraged and appropriately affirmed. Relations were mutually respectful, and students were responsive to clearly and consistently communicated expectations. There was an additional and admirable pastoral element to the interactions of many teachers with their students. Students themselves demonstrated interest, enthusiasm and, at times, a deep curiosity. They remained engaged and focused throughout. Students displayed confidence and competence in their approach to tasks.

Teachers were highly focused on ensuring understanding. There was some evidence of the use of formative assessment linked to the key relevant areas of: learning intentions: criteria for success; high-quality interaction and questioning; self and peer assessment; and formative feedback. The plan to explore assessment for learning strategies(AfL) at whole-school level is fully encouraged, as is the adoption or further embedding of related strategies and approaches.

Most lessons commenced with the monitoring and correction of homework, and a checking of related learning. Students' diaries suggest that homework is regularly assigned.

It was only in a minority of lessons that suggestions for development were offered. As a result, and because much excellent practice was observed, it is suggested that consideration be given to the introduction of focused peer observation. Building on the feedback provided about teaching and learning via the student questionnaire, further consultation with students around teaching and learning could also prove valuable.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

It is clear that recommendations are taken seriously by both management and subject departments, and much progress is noted.

3.1 Management

Management needs to address one outstanding key recommendation, and this relates to the timetabling of Physical Education for all senior cycle students. One other recommendation requires further consideration and action, namely the practice around the agreed report from board meetings.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Subject departments have given due consideration to all the recommendations of previous evaluations.

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

Senior management has promoted and supported reflection over a number of years, and staff has been proactive in their response. Review is an inbuilt feature of the work of subject departments, post-holders, and co-ordinators. There is a clear desire to enhance and improve. There is openness to learning from mistakes, alongside a willingness and capacity to embrace associated change. This modus operandi is supported by a whole-school culture that is fueled by high levels of commitment, collaboration, professionalism, respect and trust, and one that is highly focused on the best outcomes for students.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board, Senior Management and Staff of Millstreet Community School welcome the finding of the Inspectors, that the whole school culture is ‘fueled by high levels of commitment, collaboration, professionalism, respect and trust, and one that is highly focused on the best outcomes for students’.

The report acknowledges that ‘fairness, inclusion and integrity’ inform senior management’s approach. Also acknowledged in the report is the prevailing ‘spirit of collegiality and co-operation’; the ‘extremely positive classroom atmosphere’ that predominates; the guiding nature of the school’s ‘respect for all’ principle; and the cultivation of a ‘care for others mentality’.

The explicit statement that the students displayed ‘confidence and competence in their approach to tasks’ confirms the Mission Statement of the School, which seeks to promote all aspects of the development of the pupils.

Acknowledgement of the ‘very good quality of teaching, with much excellent practice observed’ is a source of pride for all at Millstreet Community School.

We thank you for your findings.

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

The Board will use the Report as a positive platform for improvement and development.