

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

**Saint Mary's Diocesan School
Drogheda, County Louth
Roll number: 63841E**

Date of inspection: 3 December 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 December 2015 in Saint Mary's Diocesan 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 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

Saint Mary's Diocesan School is a voluntary secondary school for boys, established by the Christian Brothers in 1965 and handed over to the patronage of the Bishop of Meath in 1986. The school is oversubscribed and has a current enrolment of 784 boys. It has a broad curriculum and offers the following programmes: Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY) and the established Leaving Certificate. Students come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and from both a rural and urban catchment area.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- Members of the board of management are very committed to the provision of Catholic education for boys as well as leading learning in the school community and they provide effective support and direction for senior management.
- The board is properly constituted, is aware of its legislative and financial obligations and many members have served for a long number of years ensuring good continuity.
- Senior management works extremely effectively as a team to manage and lead the school community, and has, in a relatively short period of time, introduced many worthwhile initiatives.
- Senior management is a motivating force for change and improvement.
- There is a broad curriculum in place and a commendable number of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is offered to students.
- A positive behaviour code is implemented with clear emphasis on rewarding good behaviour and motivating students to achieve their potential.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good or good in the majority of lessons with some elements of best practice observed and some scope for development in a very small number of lessons.
- There has been very good implementation of recommendations in relation to management and leadership and learning from previous inspections.
- Management and staff are enthusiastic and engaged in relation to school improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should review more formally and monitor the progress of recommendations arising from evaluations in relation to teaching and learning.
- A review of posts of responsibility, prioritised by the board, should be undertaken during 2016.
- A review of the current arrangements for learning-support provision is needed, including the establishment of a smaller dedicated team.
- Recommendations in relation to increased use of differentiation and information and communications technology (ICT), exploitation of cross-curricular links and use of the target language by students should be progressed in teaching and learning.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is constituted appropriately and is fully aware of its legislative and financial responsibilities. All board members have received the necessary training from the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) and from the Association of Secondary School Teachers, Ireland (ASTI). Board members are wholly committed to the school and to the provision of Catholic education for boys in the area. Some members have served on a number of consecutive boards and so there is very good continuity in general school planning and in the provision of required policies. All mandatory policies are in place and there is provision for regular review and redrafting when necessary. Policies in the process of review or development include the admissions policy, the code of behaviour, a critical incident policy and a healthy eating policy. The patron of the school, the Bishop of Meath, has very strong links with the school and takes a keen interest in its progress and development.

The board of management provides support and direction for senior management and is committed to leading learning in the school community. In recent years, the board introduced mixed-ability teaching in junior cycle, extended the curriculum and introduced a book-rental scheme. The following areas have been prioritised for attention in the near future: the development of the new junior cycle, the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), the introduction of the new senior cycle subject, Politics and Society, increased use of ICT, collaborative teaching, school self-evaluation and the embedding of *assessment for learning* (AfL) strategies. Some teachers are also involved in the TL 21 initiative run by NUI Maynooth. The board has indicated its intention to review the schedule of posts of responsibility this year in order to ensure that the posts are meeting the current needs of the school; this is commended.

The board has taken its responsibilities in relation to the development of the school site and the provision of education for larger numbers of students very seriously. Considerable work has been undertaken in recent years in relation to planning proactively for the development of the site, and the conversion and renovation of the former monastery building for school use. This building will be available for occupation and use in April 2016.

Many of the recommendations in relation to management, leadership and learning from previous evaluations, including a whole-school evaluation in 2006, have been implemented. However, recommendations in relation to teaching and learning should be given additional attention. It is recommended that the board should review more formally and monitor the progress of recommendations in relation to teaching and learning.

The board has very good links with the dynamic and supportive parents' association. The association has a role in fundraising, contributing to school policies and supporting the school community in a variety of ways, including participation in prefect interviews and organising talks for parents on relevant topics. Results from the parent questionnaires and views expressed at the meeting with the parents' association showed that parents are very happy with their sons' education and the opportunities provided to them in the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management, comprising the principal and deputy principal, works very effectively as a team and is a motivating force for change and improvement. The senior management team is relatively new in the school; however, roles are clearly defined and agreed. Both the principal and the deputy principal meet with parents and there is a clear open-door policy for both parents and staff. The principal, who is newly appointed, is motivating and leading the staff in a highly supportive manner. The deputy principal provides effective support for the principal and staff. Pastoral care for students is a key role for the deputy principal and this role was seen to be actively and effectively pursued during the course of the evaluation.

Staff members are encouraged to propose new initiatives and projects they are interested in progressing in the school. Continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers is promoted and encouraged and the board of management supports those teachers who are upskilling or engaging in further study by providing a financial contribution to course costs. Teachers, interviewed during the evaluation, spoke of the positive affirmation provided by senior management for work done and spoke warmly of the collective vision of management for the school.

Senior management is enthusiastic about leading improvement in teaching and learning and a range of worthwhile initiatives has been introduced to support this. These include the introduction of TL 21, in-service on AfL strategies, focus on the development of ICT facilities such as a shared drive, and improved communications among the school community. The introduction of the information screens for students and the staff email were mentioned by staff members as being especially beneficial in ensuring effective timely dissemination of information to the whole school community.

The extension of the use of ICT as a tool in teaching and learning and the further development of literacy and numeracy strategies within the context of school self-evaluation (SSE) and school improvement are also areas which senior management intend to focus on. The area of collaborative and peer teaching is being looked at by some staff members who are undertaking additional CPD in this area. A couple of subject departments have engaged in peer teaching and it is hoped that these supportive practices will be introduced on a wider basis in due course.

Staff has been facilitated to work collaboratively on subject planning, as recommended in a number of prior subject inspections, and shared folders and other ICT supports have been provided. This work is highly commended although further development will be necessary in order to ensure that the shared folders are used to their best capacity. Some subject plans were well developed and presented with integrated schemes of work showing topics or themes, methodologies, resources, learning outcomes and assessment modes. Some plans would benefit from some further development in relation to integration of the various strands in planning. Teachers are motivated and engaged and showed an openness and willingness to engage with SSE and school improvement.

The school has six assistant principal (AP) posts and three special duties posts. These posts are used primarily for year-head duties and for a small number of administrative tasks. The school has lost a number of assistant principals in recent years due to retirements. A

planned review of the schedule of posts is timely to ensure that the posts are fully meeting the needs of the school. Some teachers act as tutors on a voluntary basis for junior-cycle classes. The post holders and the tutors form the basis of the pastoral care and disciplinary system for students. Senior management meets the year heads on a weekly basis, a newly introduced initiative that is reportedly very beneficial. The care team has also been facilitated to meet regularly ensuring focused, integrated and targeted support for students. The extension of the tutor system to senior-cycle classes is recommended to ensure that the very good pastoral care and support for students continues uninterrupted to the Leaving Certificate.

Having already introduced assemblies for all year groups as a valuable support for students, the principal plans to enhance and develop the educational experience for all. Plans are in place to develop Saint Mary's as a healthy eating school and some development work has already been carried out in that regard. A monthly award system to motivate and reward students for a range of good behaviours and achievements is to be implemented. An increased focus on music and drama as well as the further development of lunchtime activities are also areas which senior management intends to pursue.

Most teachers are involved with the provision of learning support and this is based primarily on withdrawal. Every effort is made to match students with suitable teachers to whom they relate well. However, notwithstanding the efforts to support students with special educational needs in the best way possible, it is recommended that the provision of learning support be reviewed. A smaller dedicated team should be formed that will be in a better position to plan for a range of carefully targeted interventions for students to include withdrawal and other provisions.

There is a broad curriculum and good efforts have been made in recent years to extend this, through the introduction of Agricultural Science and the provision of Music after school. A second TY class has also been introduced to facilitate access to TY for a larger number of students. An additional class is in place in the current second year, additional provision that was sanctioned by the board to address a particularly large cohort in that year. Students are offered a taster programme in first year to inform their subject choices and students interviewed during the evaluation stated that this was very helpful to them. Parents and students are kept informed about programme and curriculum choices at key stages during the five or six years they spend in the school.

A student council is in place and a well-managed prefect system supports students in junior classes. Students reported themselves to be very happy at school and spoke of the welcoming atmosphere and of their pride in attending Saint Mary's. All spoke of the range of sporting opportunities available to them. Other activities such as a film club, debating, photography and creative writing are also provided, and it is planned to revisit the area of lunchtime activities with a view to further extending the provision. Junior-cycle students interviewed during the evaluation mentioned that they would like a wider range of activities during lunchtime.

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

This is a large school, served by three separate buildings, one of which is being converted and renovated presently and this is nearing completion. The board has identified the development of school infrastructure as a priority. Additional accommodation is needed

and an application is being prepared for the department. The school community makes very good use of the current resources. Good support is provided by the ancillary staff.

There has been some investment in ICT facilities in classrooms and these need to be exploited more in some lessons to support teaching and learning. The provision of a print-rich environment was a feature of many classrooms visited. The assembly and canteen area is a welcoming space which is effectively utilised.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty-one lessons were observed across a range of classes, levels and programmes. The quality of teaching and learning ranged from very good to good across the majority of lessons with some example of best practice observed and some scope for development in a very small number of lessons. Lessons were well prepared and planned for with resources and, in some cases, ICT materials ready in advance.

Learning intentions were shared with students at the beginning of most lessons and were revisited at the end, in some cases, to assess learning and progress. Learning intentions could be more effectively shared if stated in terms of what the students will be able to do as a result of their learning. The assessment of learning at the end of lessons should be extended. Active learning was a key element of many lessons with very good examples of pair and group work where students worked purposefully to complete tasks. Students were engaged, enthusiastic and generally keen to contribute. There was some scope for development in relation to engaging students in a very small number of lessons. Differentiation was very effectively used in one case observed and was lacking in some lessons where it would have engaged and challenged more able students. Teachers should plan for differentiation and for mixed-ability settings.

There was a very good atmosphere in classes and, overall, the rapport between students and teachers was excellent. Questioning was used to good effect to check for understanding and information retention. Higher-order questions were also used to probe for deeper understanding. In many lessons, there was a good balance between teacher input and student participation and this good practice should be extended to all lessons.

ICT was used to very good effect in many cases with some less effective use observed in a small number of classes. In some lessons, ICT did not feature when it could have enhanced students' learning considerably. Teachers should plan for the effective use of ICT in classes to support student learning and to stimulate interest and curiosity. There was very good use of a visualiser in a couple of lessons. Many classrooms were decorated with good examples of student work and other relevant materials to support literacy and numeracy development and students' understanding. These materials should be referred to more often during lessons and used to scaffold learning.

There was excellent use of the target language by teachers in language lessons and this is commended. However, opportunities for the students to engage sufficiently in the target language and to apply their learning were limited in some language lessons, and this should be addressed. There was a good focus on subject-specific language and key words in many cases and this is good practice. Teachers should also focus on non-subject specific words, in general use, in order to extend students' vocabulary and understanding. The observed use of dictionaries in a couple of lessons is good practice that could be further extended. Students should also be well informed about the use and benefits of online dictionaries.

While cross-curricular links were explored in some lessons, some valuable opportunities for extending students' understanding of the topic in a more general context were missed in other lessons. It is recommended that cross-curricular links be exploited to their full potential where appropriate. There were some good AfL strategies in use in some cases but these need to be developed further and should be incorporated into all lessons. For example, the traffic lights included in the student diaries could be usefully employed in junior-cycle lessons to test for understanding. Homework is being given and monitored by all teachers. However, while formative feedback was observed in some copybooks, overall, this is an area for further consideration and development. An excellent template for student and teacher assessment of examinations has been developed and this will come into use shortly.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

There has been good attention to the implementation of prior recommendations in relation to management issues. Mixed-ability teaching was introduced in 2011 in junior cycle. Some work has been done on review of posts of responsibility although more is needed and planned. Subject planning has been significantly developed. There has been some concurrent timetabling of Mathematics for recommended year groups. Collaborative planning and sharing of resources and ideas in relation to teaching and learning have all been progressed.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Subject inspections were conducted in French, Science and Biology, English, Maths and Religious Studies in recent years. Recommendations that have been implemented include the development of active and independent learning—although this needed further development in a small number of lessons—and sharing learning intentions with students. Detailed developmental feedback in copybooks is still an area for further progression.

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

The school community has engaged well with the SSE process. Various student groups were surveyed as were the school staff over recent years. Considerable amounts of data were collected. Literacy was prioritised and strategies are being implemented; the development of success criteria would enable the management and staff to assess progress. Numeracy strategies are being discussed and developed and will be rolled out for implementation in 2016. It is planned to focus on AfL strategies for the next phase of SSE and staff have availed of some initial school-based in-service. School management and staff are enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by the implementation of SSE. The overall potential for school improvement is very good.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Board of Management are extremely welcoming of this very positive report especially the

- Acknowledgement of the established, supportive and well-informed Board of Management
- References to the effective and motivating senior management team
- Commendation of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities alongside a broad teaching curriculum
- Recognised emphasis of rewarding good behaviour in the schools code of behaviour
- The recognition of the very good/good teaching observed in the school
- The credit given for implementation by management of earlier inspection recommendations
- The noting of the enthusiasm of staff and management towards school improvement

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

The Board of Management acknowledges the recommendations made by the inspectors as fair and progressive and many of these recommendations align with the development plan previously identified by School management to the Board of Management.

- In regards to the formal review of inspections the Board of Management accepts this as a very useful tool in progressing the school, and policy on inspections, which incorporates a 12 month review post inspection with the board, has been drafted.
- Post review will be carried out in the 16/17 academic year and an external facilitator has been engaged for this process.
- Regarding the timetabling of SEN the restructuring of the dispersed method to a central core team should be evident in the 16/17 timetable.
- In regards to the increased use of ICT further in-service in the Microsoft 365 platform will be given at the start of the 16/17 year to all staff. This will include enhanced use of the staff drive and Microsoft note and the introduction of the new school website and mobile application
- The cross curricular links and use of target language by student will become two pillars of subject planning for departments in the 16/17 subject planning meetings for the year. This will incorporate highlighting and acknowledging the established cross curricular links as well as creating new opportunities for cross curricular links. Focus will be put on the planning for the use of cooperative learning tasks in languages to encourage students to speak the target language.