

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**St. Brendan's Community School
Birr, Co. Offaly
Roll number: 91491L**

Date of inspection: 20 January 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 January 2016 in St. Brendan's Community School, Birr. 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

St. Brendan's Community School is managed under the trusteeship of the Presentation Brothers, the Mercy Sisters and Laois Offaly Education and Training Board. The school is co-educational, caters for in excess of 940 students and enrolment continues to increase. Students come from extensive catchment area and a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The school employs sixty-eight teaching staff and offers modern, well-equipped facilities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management adopts a very detailed and thorough approach to its work in many aspects of school management.
- The senior management team works effectively and operates an open-door policy to all education partners.
- The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum designed to meet the needs of students.
- The student-care system is of a high quality.
- Good to very good quality teaching and learning was evident in most lessons visited and exemplary practice in a range of areas was observed.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board must ensure that the school is compliant with Department of Education and Skills regulations in a number of areas.
- A greater level of oversight by the board is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- The school should develop a standard procedure to follow up on inspection reports and ensure all recommendations are implemented.
- The development of subject department planning in general and planning for improvement within subjects should be progressed.
- The integration of a variety of teaching initiatives into classroom practice needs to be prioritised and implemented.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is supported by the trustees to ensure the effective provision of education in the school. The board has demonstrated a high level of awareness of the issues facing the school and it adopts a very detailed and thorough approach to its work in many aspects of school management. The school benefits from the high level of expertise of board member and appropriate training has been accessed. Decision making is by consensus and procedures are open and clear.

The board maintains an appropriate level of contact with both the trustees and senior in-school management to ensure effective discharge of its duties. The principal's report to the board, at each board meeting, is comprehensive and ensures that the board is fully informed and up to date on all issues. The board, in collaboration with the school community, has identified an appropriate range of developmental priorities and work is underway to achieve these.

There are clear and effective procedures for policy development and review. The board has demonstrated a thorough approach and required policies are in place. Some updating of policies is necessary in order to remove a conditional entry clause in the admissions policy; to make clear the voluntary nature of the registration fee requested annually of parents; to apply the internet acceptable user policy to all users of the school's computer system; to develop a clear policy regarding exclusions; and to amend the admissions policies in relation to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Transition Year (TY) and repeat Leaving Certificate students.

There is evidence that the board adopts a slightly less hands-on approach to teaching and learning matters and examination outcomes. A small minority of subjects are performing less well than others and the board needs to lead the drive for improvement in these subjects and to maintain and enhance performance in all subject departments.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and agreed. The principal and deputy principal have a vision for the school and work effectively to share and implement this vision. They are very concerned to maintain the ethos of the school in all its daily routines and operations. They work very hard to ensure the smooth running of the school and to enable both teachers and students to work effectively. They are mutually supportive, share responsibilities and communicate effectively. The principal and deputy principal provide effective management and administration and strive to promote improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. They use a range of skills to motivate, manage and support others.

Leadership roles are well distributed at middle-management level with relevant, appropriate and clearly defined duties assigned to post holders. Post holders work effectively to manage their responsibilities and the extent of the duties carried by many post holders, and by a significant number of other staff members, is indicative of a high degree of dedication to the school and its students. Staff members are afforded and avail of opportunities to lead programmes, projects and initiatives.

Partnership with parents is central to the school ethos. The parents' association is actively involved in school activities and has made a number of significant and on-going contributions to the school for the benefit of the students. There are well-established and comprehensive procedures in place for reporting on the operation of the school to the school community. Parents are kept well informed of their children's progress and the senior management team operates an open-door policy should difficulties arise.

The students' council has recently fallen into abeyance although its members made many valuable contributions to the school in the past. Additional means of providing leadership opportunities for students have been maintained, including the *Meitheal* group and the prefects. It is recommended that the students' council be reinstated as circumstances permit; and that a role description be agreed for the prefects in order to define their role in leading their peers and contributing to the student voice in the school.

Teaching staff are deployed according to their qualifications and expertise, and are consulted appropriately in the framing of the timetable and in relation to other matters.

There is a very good programme for staff continuing professional development, the outcomes of which are shared, as appropriate, with the whole staff. The school has recently embarked on a programme of learning in relation to instructional leadership and co-operative learning. It is important that these initiatives are integrated into classroom practice in a planned and monitored manner to maximise benefits to students.

A high-quality transfer programme is in place to support in-coming first-year students, to ensure that they settle in well at an early stage.

A broad and balanced curriculum is provided which is designed to meet the needs of the students. Incoming first-year students follow a number of core subjects. A taster programme gives these students an opportunity to experience additional subjects with a final choice of subjects for junior cycle being made before the autumn mid-term break in the first year. The time allocation to junior cycle subjects is appropriate.

On entering senior cycle, students have the option of following a high quality TY programme. In addition, student's needs are also supported through the provision of the LCA programme. Leaving Certificate (Established) students also have the option of following the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which serves to further enhance choice.

Support for students with additional needs is generally well managed through a system of small-group and one-to-one tuition. It is recommended that team teaching be considered as an additional means of providing inclusive support. Additional interventions include a special class for students with specific difficulties and a special unit to provide for the needs of students on the autistic spectrum. In keeping with the inclusive ethos of the school, students benefitting from these latter arrangements are encouraged and supported to attend mainstream classes to the greatest degree possible.

The size of the special education team should be reduced in order that more focused and efficient support can be provided, maximising the use of the talents of those teachers who have the skills, training and empathy to work best with students with additional needs. In addition, a review of the deployment of teaching hours must be carried out to ensure that resources provided by the Department to support students with additional needs are used to the full extent for the purpose intended.

The school is open for the required minimum number of days each year and provides instructional time in keeping, for the most part, with Department requirements. However, the use of the final two periods each Wednesday for fifth-year and sixth-year sports contravenes the terms of circular M29/95 and must end. In addition, it is recommended that an appropriate programme of Physical Education be provided to sixth-year students.

The clearly structured code of behaviour, which has a clear ladder of referral, has been effective in ensuring that a positive atmosphere pervades the school. The effectiveness of

the code is enhanced by the high-quality care system where students in difficulty are monitored and supported. Care of students is managed through year heads and class tutors and there is a clear system of internal referrals, for both disciplinary and pastoral issues. This support is augmented by the Trustees' provision of a home-school liaison officer. The positive and supportive nature of student care was highlighted by students in their questionnaire responses. Frequent and meaningful contact is maintained between all those involved in student support and referrals to outside support agencies are possible due to effective links that have been maintained with such agencies.

Personal, educational and career guidance is available to students at all levels. Individual meetings with the guidance counsellor are available on request and a programme of classroom and other supports, relevant to the stage of progress of the students, is in place.

The school rewards and celebrates the success of students in a variety of meaningful ways, ranging from within smaller class groups to whole-school activities, including religious ceremonies in keeping with the school's ethos. The colourful displays of past events in the school corridors contribute to a positive ambience in the school.

Subject department and programme plans have been prepared. However, the quality of content and level of detail in these plans is inconsistent. In the best examples, detailed and timed schedules for course delivery have been prepared; content is expressed in the form of learning outcomes with reference to the teaching strategies by which these outcomes might best be achieved; and learning outcomes are also linked with assessment modes. It is recommended that all subject departments review their course delivery schedules and conform to a common standard to ensure that the functions of planning are met.

It is encouraging to note that many subject departments have carried out an analysis of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examination results. However, there is substantial scope to use the outcomes of these analyses, along with other evidence, to inform planning and set targets for improvement. It is strongly recommended that such an approach to generating improvement be adopted by all subject departments. Progress should be monitored over time and senior management should be kept informed on an ongoing basis. This process improvement process should be overseen by the board and senior management.

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

Work is ongoing to maintain school accommodation to the highest standard possible, including the provision of additional accommodation, the upgrade of the all-weather outdoor playing surface and the replacement of windows.

Specialist rooms are consistently used for their designated purpose and the school has provided appropriate and up-to-date high quality material resources to support learning and teaching.

An up-to-date health and safety statement, based on a risk assessment, has been prepared by the school.

The arrangements for students to leave school bags and materials down, while in class and at other times, need to be reviewed as the profusion of bags around the school, at times, constitutes a potential health and safety issue.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Almost all lessons observed were good or very good with a significant number of these lessons in the very good category and exemplary practice in a range of areas was evident. Overall, in the majority of lessons, students were well challenged and they responded by engaging well in the learning process. In these lessons, there was evidence of good quality learning.

In only a very small few lessons were significant weaknesses apparent. In these lessons, preparation was inadequate resulting in poor lesson structure, students were not sufficiently engaged by the teaching and learning process and there was little or no attempt to carry out meaningful assessment.

Learning intentions were shared with students at an appropriate point in most lessons. These were clear and relevant and the subsequent lessons were designed to achieve these intentions. Resources, materials and equipment were prepared in advance and were to hand.

Lessons were mostly well structured with a clear introduction, developmental phase and appropriate conclusion or review at the end. A range of appropriate teaching methodologies and strategies was used and the lessons were built on students' prior learning, interests and experiences. Overall, exemplary practice was observed in many aspects of teaching and there is no doubt as to the level of expertise in the school. However, much of this good practice was evident in some lessons and not in others, suggesting the need to adopt a whole-school approach to achieving consistency in high quality teaching and learning.

In many lessons, active learning methodologies were used. However, there was a tendency for teacher-led methodologies to predominate, even in active-learning situations. The balance between teacher-led and student-centred phases in lessons is an area that could be reviewed to make classrooms more student focussed.

Differentiation, to cater for the range of students' abilities and needs, was mostly achieved through a good level of teacher movement throughout the classroom, monitoring students' work and providing support where necessary. It is suggested that differentiation strategies be expanded and used, amongst other things, to provide additional challenge and support for exceptionally able students.

The quality of the tasks assigned during pair work and group work was usually good but the management of the groups did not always maximise learning opportunities. For example, roles were not assigned to students within the groups; and there were occasions where time management was not good also. However, it is very encouraging that examples of co-operative learning were evident in some of the lessons visited, indicating that teachers are using these techniques even though the school is at an early stage in this project.

Literacy and numeracy support were apparent in lessons and some good practice was observed, but in the vast majority of instances, this was only in so far as literacy and numeracy were inherent in the subject or topic being taught. There was very little deliberate intervention observed to support either, except for a small few 'numeracy moments'. This mirrors the situation in subject department plans where there was no evidence of these being integrated into the content. There is scope to significantly increase the emphasis on both literacy and numeracy skills' development.

The quality of assessment was very varied. Teachers circulated around the classrooms to a good extent, assessing students' efforts and progress. While some excellent examples of written developmental feedback on students' written work were observed, this was absent in most students' folders and copybooks. Oral feedback, on the other hand, was frequent and appropriately supportive. Overall, the use of *Assessment for Learning* methodologies was low and is recommended as an area for improvement. It is suggested that longer written exercises be used in some subjects, to familiarise students with certificate examination-type questions.

Some excellent examples of the use of questioning were seen, with an appropriate mix of lower-order and higher-order questions used. However, there was a preponderance of lower-order questioning in some lessons with an insufficient level of challenge to students. The use of more open-ended questions is encouraged in order to stimulate and challenge students to a greater extent.

The frequency and extent of the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to stimulate students and to provide interesting and stimulating visual input into lessons was very encouraging.

Classroom interactions in all lessons viewed were respectful, inclusive and supportive of good quality learning. Students were affirmed and encouraged for their efforts and contributions in class. Student management and classroom management were generally of a high quality and teachers were inclusive.

Students have access to a variety of high quality co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to support their learning and to provide a holistic learning experience. It is commended that activities of a sporting, social, religious and cultural nature are provided. The extent of the work of the teaching staff to provide these opportunities is a good example of the mission statement of St. Brendan's Community School in action.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Due attention has been paid by school management to following up on many of the recommendations from previous inspections and very good progress is evident in a number of areas. For example, management has overseen the improvement of the school's ICT infrastructure; the development and implementation a special education policy is progressing well; and improved accommodation and equipment for Music classes has been provided. However, a number of recommendations remain to be addressed as stated elsewhere in this report.

Support and encouragement have also been provided to teachers to improve the quality of subject department planning and schemes of work, the quality of written feedback to students, and the increased use of student-centred teaching approaches.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Most teachers have engaged in following up on recommendations at both subject department level and in their classrooms and work in relation to many recommendations is ongoing. Observation suggests that there has been a good level of improvement in some areas. Positive examples include teachers sharing learning intentions with students, analysing the results of certificate examinations and implementing an improved range of student-centred, active methodologies.

It is recommended that, following inspections, subject departments draw up and record plans to implement recommendations. Resulting activities should be monitored by the subject department and overseen by senior management.

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

School self-evaluation has led to the completion of two comprehensive reports, summaries of which have been shared with the school community; and two school improvement plans, in relation to literacy and numeracy. The challenge of embedding these plans into subject department plans and into everyday practice remains and work is ongoing.

The senior management team has demonstrated skill in managing and leading a complex and constantly changing organisation. Further work is ongoing in relation to developing the core teaching and learning aspects of the school's function. The board should take a lead role in overseeing the improvements outlined in this report.

It is recommended that the board, senior management and subject departments engage in action planning as a means of implementing the improvements outlined in this report. Key areas for development include integrating literacy and numeracy skills development into classroom practice; and the consistent and enhanced use of *Assessment for Learning* methodologies and of co-operative learning approaches.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

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 of Management, staff, students and parents of St. Brendan's welcome the affirmation of the many strengths of St. Brendan's Community school in this WSE Report and are pleased that so many aspects of school practices in St. Brendan's were found to be praiseworthy. The Report, adapted by the Board as integral to school development, has now become part of the school self-evaluation paradigm. The recommendations of the report are now incorporated into the developmental process.

Since the WSE the following measures have been initiated/implemented/progressed:-

- Removal of the conditional entry clause "subject to resourcing by Department of Education and Skills and subject to appropriateness of the setting", for students of all abilities within its catchment area.
The term voluntary contribution will be used instead of registration fee.
Admissions Polices to L.C.A., T.Y and I.A.U.P. have been reviewed.
Circular M29/95: Senior Games for 5th/6th Years in its present format will be discontinued from September 2016. 6th Years will be timetabled for double period of P.E. weekly. Other two periods for 5th Years used for English ad LCVP for 2016/17.
For health and safety, two school bag-racks were designed and fabricated to accommodate school bags at the entrances to the canteen/tuck shop. They are already in use.
- The Board of Management has agreed to prioritise and finance for as long as is possible the roll-out of Instructional Leadership and Co-operative Learning Programme to all subject departments and to as many staff as possible. Eight colleagues currently attending cohort 6 and 8 of instructional Leadership delivered workshops on co-operative learning in small groups to all staff recently, an undertaking given to the Board of Management by staff applying for inclusion on the programme.
- PDST recently delivered a training session to all staff on Team Teaching as recommended.
Subject Department Planning: A policy template for subject department planning is being devised to provide detailed and timed schedules for course delivery, course content in the form of learning outcomes with reference to teaching strategies and learning outcomes linked with assessment modes.
Two staff members agreed to co-ordinate literacy and Numeracy. They have attended an All-Island Conference on Sharing Best Practice on Literacy and Numeracy organised by Co-operation Ireland.
It is planned to continue our commitment to AFL by arranging whole staff training next term.
- A role description for Prefects was agreed and presented to incoming 6th Years prior to recent Prefect nominations.