

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Mountrath Community School
Mountrath, County Laois
Roll number: 91550B

Date of inspection: 19 October 2011



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Mountrath Community School was undertaken in October, 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects, Irish, English, Science\Physics and Art, were evaluated in detail. Separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

INTRODUCTION

Mountrath Community School opened in September 2009 and was formed by the amalgamation of three second level schools, namely the Brigidine Secondary School, St. Aengus Vocational School and Patrician College, Ballyfin. The school is located on the outskirts of the town of Mountrath, and is now the only post-primary school in the town. The students come from the town itself, and from a wide rural catchment area

The impressive new school building is a well-equipped, state-of-the-art, two-storey premises that was built on the site of the old vocational school. The school was built to cater for an estimated 650 students. However, 694 students were enrolled at the time of the evaluation. The school caters for students with a wide range of abilities and from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The Patrician Brothers and Le Chéile Trust, the Brigidine Sisters and County Laois Vocational Education Committee (VEC) are the trustees of Mountrath Community School. The trustees have provided the school community with eleven guiding principles. The document outlining the principles is comprehensive and emphasises the importance of the holistic development of students, inclusion, religious ethos and faith development, pastoral care and the pursuit of excellence. These values underpin the wide range of policies, practices and procedures that have been developed.

The school's mission statement emphasises the development of a positive learning environment that is based on mutual respect and dignity. There was considerable evidence during the evaluation that both the trustees' guiding principles and the school's mission statement are being lived out on a daily basis.

Amalgamation is recognised to be a long and complex process. Mountrath Community School has achieved a lot in a relatively short time in integrating the traditions and the characteristic spirit of the three schools, while at the same time developing the new school as a modern co-educational and inclusive community school with its own values and ethos.

1.2 School ownership and management

The trustees of the school were proactive in selecting a dynamic senior management team. They have made every effort to ensure that the amalgamation is a success and that the school has the necessary human and material resources to cope with the complex challenges facing it.

The board of management has an experienced chairperson and is very supportive of senior school management, staff and students. The board is properly constituted, has ten members and meets monthly from September to June. It has three representatives from the trustees of the three amalgamated schools, three VEC representatives as well as two staff and two parent representatives. The principal is an effective secretary to the board and provides a report to the board at each meeting. The board is aware of and fulfils its statutory functions. A finance sub-committee of the board has been established to oversee finances and to review the monthly financial report.

The board has had a key role, in co-operation with senior management and staff, in the development of a wide range of essential policies for the new school, most notably, the comprehensive and positive code of behaviour, the essential child protection policies, and the health and safety statement as well as a comprehensive and inclusive admissions policy. The board should now focus on the further development of school planning for improvement, school self-review and on leading curricular planning.

1.3 In-school management

The current principal and deputy principal have held their respective positions since the school opened in 2009. It was their first appointment to these roles. Although they were not teaching previously in any of the three schools that formed the amalgamated school, they have been well accepted by the teaching staff.

The first year of the school's development was a major challenge for the whole school community. The main priorities of the senior management team have been the promotion of teaching and learning, the management and care of students, the development of the building and its facilities, and the successful integration of the staffs and students from the amalgamated schools. Senior management have achieved much in a relatively short space of time on the above priorities.

The principal and deputy principal lead by example, and they are excellent role models for the whole school community. They work extremely hard and provide effective and committed leadership. They share a vision for the school and complement each other very well. They maintain a visible profile in the school and are very supportive of students and staff. The deputy principal fulfils a key role in supporting the principal in the management of the school, in promoting high academic standards, in supporting staff and in the development of the timetable.

As a result of the amalgamation, the new school had a large number of experienced post holders, many of whom had similar roles in their previous schools. The post holders are making a valuable contribution. The number of assistant principals (APs) has been effectively reduced to six due to retirements and redeployment. Most of the APs are year heads. A number of APs also play key roles in policy development and review especially in the guidance, pastoral care and learning support areas. One AP is the current school development planning co-ordinator and another is the examinations secretary. There is very good communication between senior management, APs, class tutors, teachers and the guidance and care teams especially in the management and welfare of students.

The special duties teachers perform important roles effectively such as co-ordinator of a very impressive year book, health and safety officer, internal public relations officer, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) hardware, Meitheal co-ordinator, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) co-ordinator and environmental awareness co-ordinator. There is a commitment in the school documentation to review posts of responsibility duties on a regular basis. A number of non-post holders are also to

be congratulated for their contribution to school organisation, for example, as tutors and as the co-ordinator of Transition Year (TY) and sporting and cultural activities. There is scope for greater involvement of post holders and non-post holders in overall planning for school improvement.

The school has a comprehensive and inclusive admissions policy which was last updated in March 2011. Inclusion is especially important given that it is the only second level school in the town of Mountrath and because it serves a wide catchment area. The board of management has decided to cap the number of first years entering the school. It is crucial that the number of students to be admitted is clearly outlined in the admissions policy and procedures, and that the rationale and criteria for entry and refusal are transparent. The nature, extent and operation of any waiting lists that are developed should be fully explained to the school community and to parents.

The role of the board as the decision-making body with regard to applications for entry, refusal to enrol, long-term suspension and permanent exclusion needs to be more clearly stated in school documentation. In particular, a robust local appeals mechanism needs to be established and documented before cases are referred to national appeals committees.

One of the hallmarks of the school is its positive and disciplined atmosphere. Students were very well behaved throughout the course of the evaluation. The school is an exemplar of good practice in terms of the development of positive relationships with students. A comprehensive and positive code of student behaviour is applied in a strict, fair, reasonable and caring manner. A summary of the code of behaviour is included in the student journal.

Communication with parents is well developed. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group. The student journal plays a key and effective role in communicating with parents, in the management of student behaviour, in the recording of homework, and in the monitoring of attendance.

There is an active parents' association that has a proactive chairperson and a number of committed committee members with experience of parents associations in the previous schools. They meet monthly. They fundraise, co-fund the breakfast club and organise educational talks and social events for parents. The parents' association has its own informative and easily accessible website. They are currently examining further e-learning possibilities. They also have adopted a constitution but are not affiliated, by choice, to the national parents' body.

Texting parents regarding urgent or important school information, for example notification of the closure of the school due to inclement weather, has proved to be a successful experiment and has gained wide acceptance from parents.

Students are well-managed and cared for. Issues that arise are treated in a firm, fair and sensitive manner. The home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and the school completion programme (SCP) co-ordinator are shared with other schools. They visit needy and vulnerable families, often together, on a regular basis. There is a need for a written protocol on home visits for the safety, protection and welfare of both staff and families involved. The school maintains close liaison with the local branch of the St Vincent de Paul society, which has provided assistance to a number of students and families.

The student council is being promoted with renewed vigour this year. It is co-ordinated by two teachers, has held democratic elections and has adopted a constitution. Each year group has two elected representatives on the student council. Members of the student council were articulate in sharing their views with the inspection team and in their support of the school. They now need to set priorities for their work.

The school has valuable links with the local community. These include contact with and support from local businesses, suppliers, sports clubs, St. Vincent de Paul, and an Garda Síochána.

The school has not yet developed an adult education programme that is a hallmark of most established community schools. School management should begin to plan for the timely introduction of an adult education programme. This can be of significant benefit to lifelong learning in the Mountrath area, and it will also bring the local community and the school closer together.

Students' attendance is satisfactory. Attendance is well-monitored and recorded. Follow-up is both thorough and consistent and there is a good working relationship with the local educational welfare officer (EWO). School retention is at a very high level due to the commitment of students, parents, teachers, and school management and the unfavourable external jobs market. The transfer of students to further and higher education, employment and emigration should be closely monitored in order to collect relevant data to guide the school in meeting changing needs.

The school has shown a great capacity to develop and adapt to changing circumstances and the new school environment. The staff have brought with them the skills and strengths of the three previous schools. They have set high standards for themselves and their students.

1.4 Management of resources

The teaching staff are experienced and well qualified. They are working hard to become a cohesive team. Change to the new school environment has been difficult for some staff but they have been very well supported by school management and colleagues in adapting to that change.

Continuous professional development (CPD) for all staff is valued and encouraged. Staff development is a priority of both the board of management and in-school management. Senior management has organised staff days on a range of relevant topics including active teaching methodologies, reflective practice, differentiation and the creation of a positive learning environment. The emphasis on collaborative teaching and learning in in-service provision is commended. Priorities for further in-career development for teachers should include subject planning, assessment for learning and the role of the teacher as facilitator of learning, as well as the integration of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum.

Retirements and redeployment have led to reduced staff numbers. These factors, along with the fact that Mountrath Community School is a recently amalgamated school, have resulted in a limitation in the appointment of new teachers.

The very able three-person secretarial team implement agreed and complementary roles. They are a dedicated and helpful administrative team. The caretaking and canteen staff work diligently and provide an excellent service. All of the ancillary staff stressed that the school is a very positive place in which to work, and that they were well-led, supported and included by school management and staff.

The school was open for 167 days in 2010. The delayed start for TY students has been addressed.

The management of the school building and accommodation is of a very high standard. The building is very clean and tidy. The school community is justly proud of this. The role of the staff and students and the small, but effective, caretaking and cleaning team in the up-

keep of the school's environment is acknowledged and affirmed as is the work of the Green Schools committee who are actively pursuing their first green flag for environmental involvement. Directional signage, both internal and external, needs to be improved and this matter is being addressed.

A lot of work needed to be done and has been done in order to develop, maintain and equip the new school building in its first two years of operation. The principal, in particular, takes a direct role and personal interest in every aspect of the management of the plant and material resources to ensure they are completed to the highest standards and specifications. Considerable thought and energy have gone into equipping, and in some instances adapting, the new building for the maximum benefit of students and staff.

The effective provision of ICT infrastructure and hardware is well advanced and its use by school management and for teaching and learning is being developed. The ICT co-ordinator assists management and teachers as issues arise on a daily basis, for example with regard to the operation and use of data projectors which have been installed in every classroom. A new e-learning team has been formed to devise an e-learning plan and to further promote the integration of ICT into teaching and learning.

Health and safety policies and appropriate practices are in place. A health and safety officer has been appointed.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The school does not have a dedicated school plan within a single document but rather has extensive folders on policies, procedures and planning, both curricular and pastoral. The school has rightly focussed on management of staff and students, setting high standards, team building, and on drawing up a wide range of essential policies and procedures, as well as the development of subject plans.

The school is clear about its mission, its vision and its values. The school community is developing a unified purpose, and a culture of collaborative planning. Procedures are in place to ensure all relevant stakeholders contribute to the development and review of key policies. These policy review procedures are somewhat complex and need to be simplified.

Formal school planning is a work in progress and needs to be further developed to map out future pathways for improvement and self-review. The school has benefited from involvement in the school development planning initiative (SDPI) in terms of provision of planning days, external facilitation, planning outcomes, subject planning templates and policy development. It sees itself as now being ready to develop a coherent school plan that will lead the school to further improvement in the next stage of the school's development.

This unified and coherent school plan should have a strong action-oriented, school improvement agenda with well-defined timeframes, and should contain strong elements of internal review and for self-evaluation. A representative school planning team is needed to manage the school development planning process and to build on current whole-school, curricular and subject planning. The planning team should bring coherence to school plans and planning, as well as promoting more collaborative and innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Utilising the leadership potential within the teaching staff should be an important priority in the formation of planning teams and sub-groups and in the school's planning process generally.

The work of the guidance and care planning teams has been characterised by focussed collaboration, teamwork and a culture of review. This achievement can be modelled and built upon to help develop a similar dynamic for renewed curricular planning for more collaborative and innovative learning and teaching and for more coherent whole-school reflection and self-review.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's *Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools*. Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school offers comprehensive and wide ranging Junior Certificate, and Leaving Certificate programmes. Due to the economy of scale that is possible in a large school, it provides a much wider subject choice than was possible in the three individual schools prior to amalgamation. Seventeen subjects are offered at Leaving Certificate level and the majority of students take seven or eight subjects.

Most Junior Certificate students undertake eleven or twelve subjects including Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). It is important in the light of the proposed changes to the Junior Certificate programme that the number of examination subjects taken and the teaching methodologies and assessment strategies used to deliver them are kept under constant review.

The school has an optional, well-planned, and innovative TY programme that currently caters for thirty-eight pupils who have been divided into two groups. The TY programme includes a range of standard curricular subject areas along with new areas such as digital media studies. Students apply in writing and are interviewed by a member of the TY team. Students' motivation, suitability for the programme and previous disciplinary record may be taken into account.

The LCVP programme is well established in the school and the benefits of it including its vocational aspects and the extra points awarded to LCVP students are well recognised. The programme is well managed and has been a significant benefit to a large number of students. It is recommended that the LCVP team work towards heightening awareness, at whole-school level, of the integrated nature of the LCVP. A LCVP noticeboard in the staffroom would assist in this regard. The LCVP team should explore with subject departments the links between their subjects and the curriculum of the link modules and document this information.

The school does not offer the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme but has sought in the past to be included in this programme. The school caters well for the less able pupils in smaller learning support classes. Careful and active consideration should be given to the advantages and disadvantages of introducing the LCA for a cohort of students who would benefit from the personal, academic and vocational aspects of the programme. A cost-benefit analysis should be undertaken to identify the opportunities and challenges involved in introducing the LCA programme, especially to determine the suitability of the

programme for these students, and to establish the ability of the school to meet the considerable staff training needs that would be required.

All subjects departments have appointed co-ordinators, often on a rotational basis. Opportunities for subject meetings and subject planning are provided at least once a term. Minutes of meetings are recorded on a common template and kept in subject planning folders. Good progress has been made in the majority of subject areas and programmes. However, the format and quality of subject planning varies greatly from subject to subject, and there is scope for more collaborative subject planning. Greater direction, coherence and standardisation are required in subject planning, with less of the focus on content and with greater attention paid to collaborative working, ways of learning, learning outcomes, and on varied and innovative teaching methodologies and assessment strategies.

The deputy principal, in particular, deserves great credit for the work on the school timetable, which is well-planned, and easily understood. The timetable is compiled in a fair and transparent way and in the best interests of students and staff. Teachers are deployed in line with their abilities and subject specialisms. Management gives as many teachers as possible the experience of teaching at both higher and ordinary levels. This is commended.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Excellent support is offered to students to inform their subject choices at all levels. Information evenings for parents are held at crucial transition stages where subject information and choices are explained. An enrolment night for prospective first years is held in the month of February preceding their entry, when the range of subjects on offer is outlined by both staff and students. Teachers and students also visit local primary schools to promote the school, and to outline the programmes and facilities on offer.

A second year subject choice form for completion by parents and students informs them of the availability of subjects. The school's website is well planned and informative with regard to the curriculum on offer. The parents' association also has a separate well-developed website that gives valuable updates on school activities.

Senior students are given an open choice of subjects. Subject option bands in fifth year are based on student preferences. Guidance and support systems to support students' choice of subjects at senior cycle are excellent. Parents are consulted regularly and are involved in their children's subject choices when and where appropriate.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

The school makes available a very wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Teachers are to be commended for the great voluntary contribution they make in promoting sporting and cultural activities. The two impressive school yearbooks produced to date give comprehensive and lively accounts of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. They provide an important historical record of these activities and their benefits. There are timely, unobtrusive school announcements during the school day and electronic notice boards are used effectively on a daily basis. More traditional notice boards are well-placed and well used.

School tours to places like Manchester and Munich and more locally based trips, using local resources such as the Slieve Bloom mountains, as well as Geography field trips to the Wicklow mountains provide memorable educational experiences for students. The staff commitment to these educational activities is commended. Projects with a cross-curricular

focus on Mountrath and the surrounding area that would serve as both an educational and promotional activity for the school should be considered.

Sporting interests are very well-catered for. Hurling, camogie, boys and girls Gaelic football, basketball, athletics, table tennis, badminton and indoor soccer are the main team sports played. Volleyball and spikeball, an adaptation of volleyball, are also played to a high level. It is particularly noteworthy that great effort is made to co-ordinate the timing and the number of team fixtures held daily and weekly in order to minimise the impact on class time.

The support of local sports clubs is acknowledged and appreciated by school management and staff. An annual meeting with the various local clubs, for example, with local hurling and football clubs would improve mutual support, co-ordination of training and player welfare. The comprehensive redevelopment of the outdoor playing pitch has been a major success story and will make a great contribution to the sporting life of the school and the local community.

The school's large gymnasium is both modern and well-equipped and is used effectively for physical education and related activities. The well-resourced fitness suite is used by both students and staff. Plans are afoot to make these facilities more widely available to the local community and these should be brought to fruition.

The performing arts are well-catered for. Music, debating, public speaking and drama are supported by the active involvement of the Music department, the English department, the TY team and by other staff members. The talent and variety shows are a highlight of the school year. The school has also had success in national poetry reading and mathematics competitions. Liturgical events such as masses, prayer services, retreats and end-of-year celebrations also provide an outlet for musical and other talents as well as assisting with faith formation. A lunchtime traditional music group is recording a compact disc. The school is to be congratulated for its involvement in the Green schools initiative, the Gaisce President's Awards and for its involvement in a Rotary leadership competition.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

The following subjects were evaluated: Art, English, Irish and Science and Physics. Below is a composite section drawn from the individual subject reports.

4.1 Planning and preparation

Collaborative subject planning is developing well. Subject teachers also meet informally on a very regular basis to share resources, ideas and perspectives. A subject plan has been developed for most subjects. The majority of the subject plans inspected in this whole school evaluation contained most of the required elements of good quality planning. The members of the science team have co-operated very well in establishing a well-functioning department. The teachers of English have made a very good start in terms of subject planning. Course delivery in Art is based on a documented plan that is implemented in a conscientious way. Good long-term plans for Irish are in place for all year groups with the exception of TY. Greater emphasis in subject planning on more active methodologies, learning outcomes and formative assessment is suggested in some of the subject inspection reports.

Individual teacher planning for the majority of classes observed was good and teachers keep very good records of work done. Subject departments are well resourced. Safety considerations are well catered for in practical subject areas such as Art and Science.

4.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching observed during the evaluation was good or very good in most lessons. The best lessons were well structured, clearly presented and paced at an appropriate level. In the majority of lessons observed during this whole school evaluation, the learning objectives were outlined at the start of lessons and returned to at the end of lessons. However, practice varied in this regard. In some lessons observed learning outcomes need to be re-emphasised and fully integrated into teacher planning and teacher practice.

A wide range of appropriate methodologies was observed during the evaluation. For example, questioning strategies were well used. Some teachers used brainstorming and mind mapping to elicit students' responses. A variety of teacher-directed methodologies were employed. In many lessons active teaching and learning strategies were also in evidence. It was evident also that students were learning best when they were more actively involved. A number of the subject reports refer to the need to give students more opportunities to use their creativity and to take more responsibility for their own learning.

In Irish lessons good practice was evident in the use of the target language. Most teachers of English used ICT well to enhance teaching and learning. There was an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, with good examples of teaching of new vocabulary into English lessons and of developing effective writing skills. However, there is a need for a more integrated whole-school approach to planning and delivery of literacy and numeracy.

All lessons observed were characterised by good teacher-student relationships. Teacher expectations were high. All lessons observed were well managed and an atmosphere of positive discipline was evident. Students were well behaved, focused and engaged well. Teachers were affirming of students' efforts.

4.3 Assessment

Formal assessments take place biannually at Christmas and in May. The annual mock examinations are set and corrected externally. The school is working towards common assessments and is making good progress in this regard. Students are also assessed through regular end-of-topic, monthly and end-of-term tests. The science and physics teachers showed good practice in analysing student outcomes in the State Examination Commission examinations.

There was inconsistent practice in the monitoring of students' written work. Good assessment practices were observed where students' written work was monitored and formative feedback was given to help students to identify and address areas for improvement. This needs to be done on a more consistent basis. Assessment for learning principles (Afl) should inform the future development of formative and developmental assessment practices particularly in relation to students' written work.

A pilot academic monitoring project is being developed. This should be carefully monitored so that it adds value to student effort and achievement. Care should be taken that it does not overburden some students.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school is inclusive of students with additional educational needs and caters well for the diverse range of student needs. Very good procedures to help with the identification of students with additional educational needs have been developed. These procedures include timely requests to parents to supply relevant information, consultations with educational psychologists; discussions with the special education needs organiser (SENO) and visits to local primary schools. Students are assessed on entry to determine levels of ability and to help identify those in need of learning support. The number of students with specific learning needs and issues had been identified for each year group in 2011-2012.

There is a dedicated and empathetic learning support co-ordinator in place. There is an appropriate policy for resource teaching and leaning support, and there is a commitment to review this policy annually. More than twenty teachers are involved in the learning support team which makes planning and the development and sharing of expertise and information difficult. The size of this team needs be reduced and the teachers with the necessary skills and empathy should be included. Teachers who are engaged in learning support and resource teaching complete a record of work sheet daily. The school has benefited from a staff day from the second level student support team (SESS) in October 2010 in relation to planning, assessment and record keeping.

The small resource / learning support planning team needs to be enlarged in order to deliver a more coherent whole-school approach to special needs provision. Currently students, who have exemptions from Irish, and those, who do not study a continental language, access learning support or resource hours at the class times for these subjects. It is the school's aim to develop individual education plans (IEPs) for each of the incoming first year students in need of support and the long-term plan is that all students with identified additional needs will have an IEP. Individualised planning should become a normal element of provision for all students with special educational needs and those in receipt of learning support as soon as possible.

The school has some elements of the Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) in operation. This makes the curriculum more accessible to some students. LCA, however, is not available to students.

A number of supports, such as small group tuition, are in place for students with additional needs. An interesting experiment in this area is the establishment of a learning support class for those students with additional learning needs at both junior and senior cycle. The most obvious benefit for students of this experiment is the provision of smaller classes of twelve or thirteen students. It was not possible to fully explore the effectiveness of these classes during the evaluation. Their operation and effectiveness should be kept under constant review.

The school has one experienced and committed special needs assistant (SNA).

Supports are in place to aid the inclusion of students from disadvantaged, minority and other groups, and those for whom English is a second language. This is commended. There are over twenty nationalities represented in the student body. Traveller students are well catered for in an integrated setting. The important breakthroughs that have been made in the school with a number of Traveller students who are making steady progress at second level is in line with national policy in this area.

A well-stocked and well-developed canteen is in operation in the school. The availability of meals is a valuable facility for students and staff. The provision of a breakfast club, part funded by the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the parents' association, is a recent and welcome addition to the supports available. The development of a homework club offers considerable benefits to some students in first and second year.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The guidance, care and support of students are a real strength in this school. Guidance provision and the care and welfare of students are well planned, and are well co-ordinated by senior management, the guidance team, the school chaplain, and the care and learning support teams. The work of the guidance and the wider care teams are characterised by a spirit of reflection and drive for improvement that is an exemplary model of whole-school action planning.

The school has an allocation of 1.5 posts for guidance and counselling. These posts are used very effectively and efficiently to benefit all year groups. The two guidance teachers work well as a team and are ably complemented by other student support personnel such as the chaplain and the learning support co-ordinator.

Vocational guidance and advice on career opportunities are very good for almost all levels and year groups. More career advice for second years should be considered. The appropriate use of ICT for accessing course details and entry requirements for third level colleges at home and abroad was in evidence during the evaluation and in planning documents.

The Meitheal team is ably co-ordinated by a post holder and mentors first year students. Meitheal members gain valuable leadership skills and training in the process. Class prefects help with the supervision and management of students especially during break times. Both groups, as well as the student council, are to be congratulated for their commitment and involvement.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A lot has been achieved by school management and staff since the establishment of the school in 2009 in integrating the traditions and the characteristic spirits of the three pre-existing schools while at the same time developing a modern, co-educational school with its own values and ethos.
- The school's comprehensive mission statement emphasises the development of a positive learning environment that is based on mutual respect and dignity, and these characteristics were very much in evidence during the evaluation.
- The trustees of the school were proactive in selecting a dynamic senior management team; they formulated a document detailing eleven guiding principles and made every effort to ensure that the amalgamation is a success.
- The very able principal and deputy principal work extremely hard and provide effective and committed leadership for the school.
- The main priorities of the senior management team to date have been the promotion of effective teaching and learning, the management and care of students, the development of the building and the successful integration of the staffs and students from the three previous schools.

- Teachers are dedicated and professional and are becoming more collaborative in their work; they have adapted very well to the new school context.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good to very good in most lessons.
- The school has a very wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities and teachers are commended for their great voluntary contribution.
- The school is an inclusive one and, as it now the only second-level school in Mountrath, it is vital that it continues to be inclusive of students with a diverse range of needs including those with additional educational needs.
- Guidance provision and the care and welfare of students are well planned, well delivered and are well co-ordinated.
- The student council, Meitheal mentors for first year students and class prefects provide effective support to their fellow students and provide valuable leadership opportunities for those involved.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The board of management should build on the school's substantial progress to date and take a more proactive role in leading school improvement and in leading curricular development.
- A coherent school plan should be developed as a single document that has a strong action-oriented, school improvement agenda with well-defined timeframes and this plan should contain strong elements of internal review and self-evaluation.
- A representative school planning team should be established to build on current planning and policy development in order to help develop the school plan and to facilitate the greater involvement of staff in overall school improvement and self-review.
- Planning for teaching and learning needs to be prioritised in some subjects in order to focus more on collaborative working, learning outcomes, on varied and innovative teaching methodologies and on active learning and assessment strategies.
- Good assessment practices were observed where students' written work was monitored, and where formative feedback was given to help students identify and address areas for improvement. This needs to be done on a consistent basis.
- The pilot academic monitoring project should be carefully developed so that it adds value to student effort and achievement, and care should be taken that it does not overburden some students.
- Active consideration should be given to the introduction of the LCA in order that the personal, academic and vocational benefits of the programme will be available for students.
- School management should plan for the introduction of an adult education programme to support lifelong learning in the Mountrath area.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and deputy principal, staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of Art – 17 October 2011
- Subject Inspection of Gaeilge – 21 October 2011
- Subject Inspection of English 19 October 2011
- Subject Inspection of Science / Physics – 19 October 2011
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