Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Portlaoise College
Mountrath Road, Portlaoise
Co. Laois
Roll number: 71510A

Date of inspection: 22 January 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Portlaoise College was undertaken in January, 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in three subjects, Art, English and Mathematics within mainstream provision were evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). A previous subject inspection in Science and Biology was conducted in February 2009 and forms part of the evidence base for the whole-school evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

INTRODUCTION

Portlaoise College was established as Portlaoise Vocational School in 1907. Throughout its history the school has been the main provider of vocational education in the town. Following a decline in the school’s second-level enrolments in the 1980s the school redeveloped as the main provider of continuing education in the Portlaoise area.

Portlaoise College is a non-selective co-educational school that caters for second-level students. The school also provides for adult and community education through the provision of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and night classes. It is administered by County Laois Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) and the board of management, a sub-committee of the VEC. Portlaoise College is included in the current Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme.

The school is one of three providers of second-level education in the Portlaoise urban area. In September 2006 the school moved from its original town-centre location to a new purpose-built site on the Mountrath Road. From a relatively small base the school’s second-level enrolment has more than doubled since the move to the new site.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school’s ethos, reflected through the school’s mission statement, supports the pastoral and academic achievements of the students and helps promote close links with the wider school community. The school’s atmosphere is welcoming, and conveys a sense of orderliness, community and care. The school’s ethos, which can be characterised as inclusive and co-operative, is built on a culture of respect and is evident in the daily life of the school. The good quality relationships among and between the staff and the students and the good behaviour of the students evidenced during the evaluation are further characteristics of the positive atmosphere that permeates the school.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management was recently re-constituted and is representative of a range of partners including the VEC, staff, parents and the local community. The board operates as a sub-committee of County Laois VEC and meets regularly during the school year to discuss policy issues. As the administrative authority of the school, the VEC is responsible for areas such as overall financial and personnel issues. The board carries out its functions in a manner which reflects the school ethos. Decision-making is by consensus and
communication systems have been put in place for each group represented on the board to disseminate outcomes and decisions to its parent body.

Both the school principal and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the VEC, keep the board well informed of its responsibilities and the wider implications of the range of education legislation for both the school and the board. Appropriate policies as required by legislation are drafted at school level by the senior management team, supported by the school development planning co-ordinator and school development planning groups. These draft policies are then presented through the principal to the board for approval. It is recommended that when presenting draft policies to the board of management, a teacher involved in formulating or redrafting existing policies gives a presentation outlining the detail of the policy to the board. This will enable the board to have a greater insight into the rationale behind the policy, the decision-making processes used and the impact its implementation will have at school level. It will also provide the board with an insight into the day-to-day operation of the school and contribute to the professional development of the board.

The operation of the board indicates that it perceives its role as advisor to the senior management team. In the past year considerable attention was given to the review of the school’s admission policy and code of behaviour. The involvement of all groups on the board has proved to be a valuable resource in incorporating the views of the wider school community in the overall planning and management of change in the school. In particular, the involvement of parents’ representatives is important during this period as the parents’ council is being redeveloped.

The board is particularly cognisant of the change in its own operation in recent years. For some time its work was primarily focused on disciplinary and student care issues. It has been enabled to refocus and broaden the scope of its activities through the prioritisation by school management of the review of the school’s code of behaviour and the refinement of its care structures. This has allowed greater time for discussion and prioritisation of other whole-school issues. In this respect the board is advised to further inform itself of progress within the school especially in relation to teaching and learning. Each year a synopsis of students’ attainment in examinations in both mainstream and PLC provision should be presented to the board.

As the board has been recently constituted it is an appropriate time to ensure that all board members are apprised of their obligations under the terms of the governing legislation and that opportunities that arise for training for board members should be availed of by members of the board even if they have served on previous boards.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal have both been appointed to their posts in the past two years. Despite the recent appointment of the senior management team, it has quickly established its position and role within the school. The management approach of the principal and the deputy principal encourages openness and collaboration. It was evident during the evaluation that there is a high level of goodwill towards the new management team. This is matched by the principal’s and deputy principal’s respect for the staff and the work that they have undertaken towards developing the school, especially since the move to the new site.

The complementary skills of the senior management team members ensures that the school is managed in an effective manner that creates a climate in which all members of staff can work together productively to advance the school’s planning priorities. Of particular importance has been the experience each individually brings to the management team. The
principal’s experience in managing interventions targeted at educationally disadvantaged students means that she has an excellent overview of how the range of supports that are in place in the school interlink to support students in their learning as well as in their personal and social development. The principal’s collaborative style, allied to strong interpersonal skills, means that staff have engaged positively with the change agenda that both she and the more recently appointed deputy principal have progressed quickly since taking on their roles. Key to their vision is the expansion of mainstream second-level provision. In the short term this has involved streamlining school policies and procedures and the implementation of the DEIS plan for the school. They have also sought to refine the operational management of the school with the focus on improving student care systems and the management of students.

The middle-management team has shown a great deal of commitment to the school over many years. The principal and deputy principal have high expectations of middle management’s capacity to carry out its roles and responsibilities in a professional manner. The team carries a diverse range of responsibilities and these were reviewed by the principal on taking up her post. The objective of the review was to link the duties firmly to the priority needs of the school. Considerable progress was made as a result of this review and post holders were flexible in changing their functions to meet the evolving needs of the school.

The diverse nature of the school’s provision means that there is a significant need to delegate within the context of the school’s management. One area that requires further development relates to the PLC provision. A number of posts of responsibility relate to the co-ordination of specific courses or disciplines. This results in duplication, as many of the co-ordination tasks are similar. It also means that the reporting lines to senior management are multiplied. The next review of posts should prioritise the overall co-ordination of PLC provision thereby strengthening and expanding the intermediary management layer between PLC provision and senior management.

An additional outcome from the next review of posts should be the drafting of detailed descriptors for the duties associated with each post. These would provide a useful base for future reviews. Also at this time, it would be useful for the principal and deputy principal, after their first year working together as a team, to discuss and formalise their own duties. An outline of the duties carried out by the principal and deputy principal should be included with the descriptors for post-holders.

During the inspection it was evident from both the interactions at school level and the documentation provided that the key principles and procedures governing the management of students are framed within the context of the school’s mission statement but reflect the differing needs of both mainstream and PLC students. This whole-school focus is reflected in current developments in school policies. For example, there is a new attendance policy for PLC students and attendance has been prioritised within the school’s DEIS plan. The Learners Policy at PLC level focuses on students attaining full FETAC awards while, in mainstream provision, attainment is a key DEIS priority.

The principal prioritised a review of both the admissions policy and the code of behaviour when she took over as principal in the 2008/09 school year. Neither of the previous policies was meeting the needs of the students or the school given the change in the school’s context. Allied to this review was the formal structuring of a student care system in the school. The introduction of the year-head system allied to the new code of behaviour was commented on at the pre-evaluation meetings with parents and the board as a welcome development. It was also evident at school level that great efforts were made by the teachers to ensure the consistent application of the code of behaviour. Student behaviour observed during the evaluation, at lesson transition, within lessons and on entry and exit to
school, was good. Of particular merit was the support given to a student with special educational needs by other students during one of the lessons observed. Also noticeable is a decline in the number of days lost through suspension, proportionate to the number of student, in the last academic year.

The school has two student councils, one for mainstream students and a second council for PLC students. Designated teachers are working with both councils to establish their operations and facilitate improvement as each council is in an early stage of development. The constitution of the student council for mainstream students has recently been reviewed. All year groups are represented and the council is structured to promote gender balance in its representation. The result is that a large number of students are involved, which makes it difficult to ensure that the views and opinions of all members are included, especially those of younger students.

As representation is broad it would be beneficial if the views of all students were considered in discussions. The involvement of junior cycle students with the work of the council can be improved through either rotating the representation of students at council meetings or by having a preparatory meeting with junior cycle students in advance of the main council meeting. A preparatory meeting would allow younger students to have an opportunity to reflect on the agenda and formulate their responses and contributions for the main meeting. The officers of the council should present an annual report of the council’s activities to the board of management and the occasional informal meetings between the student council and the principal should be formalised and regular.

The involvement of parents in the school is recognised by the senior management as an area requiring further development. While a parents’ council exists, its activities in its early years was largely limited to supporting the then management team in advocating for a new school premises. It is also apparent from its records that it was difficult to attract parents to become involved with the association, most likely because the pool of parents was limited.

It is acknowledged by the inspection team that those parents who have been involved for some time have given great service to the association. As student numbers have increased, the impetus for improving the operation of the association has strengthened. This has been prioritised by school management within the DEIS plan and the home-school-community-liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator has been charged with developing strategies to improve parents’ involvement with both the association and the school. To progress this objective, a programme of activities has been designed and is ongoing in the school. Resources available are very good as the school has a dedicated home-school-community room available.

The school’s management, teachers and administration staff are cognisant of the need to communicate clearly with the diversity of parents, including students for whom English is an additional language. Samples of letters used to communicate with parents, viewed during the evaluation, indicate an emphasis on plain English. Parent-teacher meetings are organised annually and in line with the agreed procedures. The introduction of the year-head system has also improved communication systems with parents as the year heads provide a direct link between home and the school’s care system.

The school runs a very extensive adult education programme in the evenings. Links with the business community are forged through the work experience programme of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) that is part of the school’s senior cycle curriculum. As the school is involved in a number of initiatives, including DEIS and the School Completion Programme (SCP), an extensive network of links with relevant agencies has been established. Also key to this network are the relationships of the school with the VEC and with its feeder primary schools, which are well established.
Self-evaluation and review will be critical to ensuring the effectiveness of the school to respond to the challenges presented by future changes in the school’s context and the needs of students. The recent experience of developing the DEIS plan indicates that the capacity for self-review and evaluation exists at school level. As a follow on, senior and middle management must ensure that the systems for reviewing outcomes from the DEIS plan are effective and that staff engage with the necessary continuing professional development required to implement the objectives of the plan.

1.4 Management of resources

The school is in compliance with Department of Education and Skills regulations with respect to the instructional time per week. Currently class contact hours for mainstream students amounts to twenty-eight hours. This includes the five minute tutor time at the beginning of each day. The inspection team was satisfied that this was not administrative but instructional in nature.

The guiding principles in the deployment of teachers are that they are deployed in keeping with their qualifications and to meet the needs of the curriculum, students, the school and the VEC. Teacher deployment must also reflect the professional development profile and skills of the teaching team. There is evidence that some teachers have up-skilled, on a voluntary basis, to meet the different needs of the student cohort within the school, especially in the PLC area. A pattern has emerged over time where teachers, many of whom form the permanent cohort of the teaching staff, have migrated to teaching PLC provision only. However, where teachers’ competencies are such that they can teach in both mainstream and PLC provision, it is in their interest and the school’s that they should be deployed in both areas. This will maintain their skill set and benefit collegiality among the teaching staff as they have a depth of experience of benefit to both their colleagues and students. There has been recent evidence of changes in the deployment pattern between PLC and mainstream provision and this is welcomed and further efforts in this area are encouraged.

The rapid expansion of student numbers in the past three years has consequentially increased the size of the school’s teaching staff. In line with the vision of senior management for the development of the school’s curriculum provision, there is ongoing review of the current and future staffing needs of the school. Management has endeavoured, through the recruitment process, to build in capacity to meet the needs of the expanding curriculum.

The school benefits from an experienced and committed team of support staff. As well as fulfilling assigned duties, the team provides valuable formal and informal supports and links between the school and the VEC, parents, students and staff.

Portlaoise College’s new purpose-built school is located on a campus with a second smaller school building which is owned by the VEC and is currently leased to Gaelscoil Phort Laoise. Both mainstream and PLC students are located in the main building. The school also has an autism unit funded and resourced by the Department of Education and Skills.

The co-location of mainstream and PLC students in one building brings certain challenges as the needs of the two cohorts are different. The school’s management team is cognisant of those needs and has taken simple measures to promote a separate identity for both cohorts, while respecting that the school’s ethos and systems would equally apply to both student groups. One entrance has been designated for the use of PLC students and classrooms for those students are located in one area of the building. PLC students also have access to a common room which doubles as a canteen facility. As most PLC specialist rooms are located in this end of the building there is only occasional cross over to the school’s other
specialist rooms, and, through careful timetabling, the level of cross over required is minimised.

Students from mainstream provision enter the school through a second entrance. The designation of a separate entrance for mainstream students is allied to the school’s attendance strategy under the DEIS plan as the attendance co-ordinator is onsite each morning to monitor latecomers and absences.

The facilities in the school are excellent. As well as the mainstream classrooms that are well equipped with ICT resources, the specialist rooms are well equipped and provide great scope to maintain and broaden the curriculum provision for mainstream students. The school also has additional facilities including a library, sports hall, staffroom, resource rooms, and offices and meeting rooms. As a priority the school’s management has targeted enhancement of the school’s canteen facilities, especially as it is planned that more students will remain onsite during lunch break.

Though the building is new it is evident that great attention is paid to its maintenance. As the school also provides adult education and is used outside of school hours by community groups and others, including Laois School of Music, this is not easy. The school’s caretaking and cleaning team is commended for the attention given by them to ensure that the facilities are kept well. The school has a health and safety statement which is currently being updated.

Through the support provided by the VEC, the school provides appropriate and up-to-date material resources to support learning and teaching. The system for the allocation of materials has been revised by the principal and is monitored by the principal working with each of the subject departments. The office team process the authorised requests and maintain relevant records.

The school and VEC have invested considerably in the development of the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. Teachers have access to the school’s network which is used for communication through e-mail. Shared folders are also set up for the storage of subject-based resources and some subject departments have made good progress in this area. All subject departments should fully utilise this capacity in developing shared resources to support teaching and learning.

The school is also moving to integrate attendance monitoring though the e-portal system. This will improve the information systems and is consistent with the schools DEIS priority in relation to school attendance. There is heavy demand on the specialist rooms, particularly in the PLC area where ICT courses are on offer. However, ICT resources are also available to all mainstream students. Students in every year group receive one period per week of instruction in ICT where the emphasis is on the development of basic ICT literacy and skills. This is excellent provision and in keeping with the school’s vocational ethos.

2. **QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING**

2.1 **The school plan**

The principal and a designated post holder, at assistant principal level, are responsible for the co-ordination of the school’s development planning process. In recent years the engagement by all staff with school development planning has been very good. Prior to the school’s move to its new site in 2006 significant preparatory work was completed by the then management and staff in planning for that transition. In anticipation of an increase in
student numbers at second level, the curriculum programme was reviewed and expanded. Work also took place at school level, in co-operation with the VEC, to increase the profile of the school locally as a provider of second-level education. This reflected the school’s existing strong profile as a provider of PLC courses. During the transition period significant work was done to develop the range of school policies and procedures. Many of these policies were ratified by the board during the 2007/08 school year. The new senior management team has developed a rolling review mechanism whereby key policies are identified for immediate review in light of the school’s changing context. This is very good practice as, despite how recently the policies were developed, the school’s context has radically altered in a very short period. In the short space of time since the new management team’s appointment, key policies including the code of behaviour, attendance, and admissions policies have already been reviewed.

The school planning co-ordinator has been in the position for a number of years and has developed very good systems and practice in relation to planning. Of particular merit is the annual report completed each year by the co-ordinator and submitted to the school’s senior management team. This report is well structured and clearly sets out the identified priorities and achievement in relation to each of these in the preceding academic year. It is recommended that this report is also made available to the board of management.

Collaboration among staff in relation to school development planning is very good. A review of the relevant documentation indicates that teachers have willingly engaged with school development planning over a number of years and have been ably led by the co-ordinator in this process. The review of planning records indicates a strong capacity at school level for self review, identification of development priorities and action planning. This capacity is best exemplified by the process and outcomes associated with the development of the school’s DEIS plan. Identifying objectives and priorities and setting realistic and achievable targets is central to the success of DEIS planning. The DEIS plan was formulated under the guidance of the current principal and senior staff members. This planning team endeavoured to follow the guidelines and increase the emphasis on target-setting, including the use of baseline data, within the DEIS plan. Key school-based targets in relation to attendance, literacy and attainment have been identified. While the plan has taken a more integrated and focused approach to a range of school-based initiatives, a critical success factor will be the focus that needs to emerge in relation to the measurement of progress and outcomes. In this respect the school will need to develop appropriate research and evaluation tools that measure the school’s progress in relation to its agreed targets and objectives.

What has emerged at school level from the development of the DEIS plan is the prioritisation of teaching and learning as the key drivers of improving student attainment. Curricular interventions have been identified including the introduction of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) as appropriate to progressing the DEIS objectives. In referring to teaching and learning the DEIS plan indicates that additional appropriate interventions are required at classroom level to progress teaching and learning. As a next step, it is recommended that there is further development of curriculum plans for each subject area in line with the school’s ongoing work in relation to the DEIS plan. The subject plans should include greater detail on relevant interventions and strategies especially those relating to teaching methodologies focusing on differentiation and assessment.

Subject departments have been established and a subject co-ordinator is responsible for co-ordinating curriculum planning and provision within each subject area. Subject planning is relatively recent in mainstream provision and while good work has been done to date there is scope for improvement in some subject areas especially in integrating DEIS objectives within the subject plans. Teachers of PLC courses are more experienced in this area and
there is potential for sharing expertise at school level. The school’s management actively promotes subject planning and reviews the plans on an annual basis. This is excellent practice.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with post-primary circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management and school staff; 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.

A system should be put in place to ensure that the guidelines are brought to the attention of parents of all incoming students to the school.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school’s curriculum provision at second level was extended to reflect the increase in the schools enrolment following its transfer to the current site. The revised curriculum provides good opportunities to meet most students’ needs and interests. Junior cycle students follow the Junior Certificate programme and, at senior cycle, students follow the established Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Recently the school has introduced the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in pursuance of its DEIS plan priorities.

The introduction of the JCSP at junior cycle has given the school the opportunity to broaden the range of learning experiences for students and structure programmes specific to students with additional educational needs. It also provides teachers with further opportunities to extend the range of teaching styles used in classroom environments. It is also anticipated that the programme will facilitate improvements in the retention rate of the target group of students to junior cycle. As a next step the school must consider the needs of its student cohort including those who will complete the JCSP, and start planning for a similar curricular intervention at senior cycle. It is recommended that the school initiate planning for the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The introduction of the LCA will broaden the range of opportunities available to specifically identified students and will further develop the school’s capacity to meet the needs of those students in a structured way. As some of the learning experiences and methodologies used can be quite similar between the JCSP and LCA programmes, it is a reasonable decision to introduce the LCA to the senior cycle curriculum given the nature of the student cohort and school context.

Recently the school has initiated developments to extend opportunities for higher attaining students through the focused use of resources. Among the interventions is the provision of dedicated higher-level classes for students in key subjects including English and Mathematics. This is consistent with the objectives of the school’s DEIS plan. The plan concentrates mainly on improvements for students of weaker abilities but also includes indicators for promoting attainment among better able students. An improvement in higher-level participation rates in key curricular subjects in recent years indicates that progress in relation to these outcomes is ongoing and that there has been a degree of success.
The contributions of parents and the board during the evaluation indicate that the wider school community is satisfied that the current curriculum provision meets the needs of students attending the school. However, some interest was expressed by parents in the possible introduction of the Transition Year (TY) programme for students as a mechanism for improving student preparation for subject choice and career consideration as students enter senior cycle. The evaluation team recommends that the introduction of the TY form part of the long-term planning process for the school and that the emphasis remains, for now, on the pursuit of the current short-term and medium-term curricular objectives as outlined in this report and the DEIS plan.

The school’s management is commended for its decision to change the way in which junior cycle classes are organised. The change to mixed-ability groupings in first year is a positive step in promoting the objective of improved attainment through class provision. The main challenge facing teachers arising from this change will be the need to improve the level of differentiation included in the teaching of the subjects. The school’s management is conscious of this need and plans to provide support to teachers in this area. As an additional measure, it is recommended that subject plans detail methodologies appropriate to differentiated teaching and specific to individual subjects.

Subjects at all levels are generally provided with the appropriate time allocations as set out in the syllabus guidelines. There is a good mix of single and double periods for optional and practical subjects at both junior and senior cycle. The difficulties of timetabling teachers for both PLC and mainstream programmes is minimised through the prioritisation by management of timetabling for mainstream provision. This is good practice as the duration and spread of lessons is more critical in mainstream provision in maintaining student attention and engagement with the lesson objectives.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

The school offers a broad range of subjects to both junior and senior cycle students. The process of curriculum review is driven by the school’s senior management team and involves discussion at staff level. The driver for curricular change has been the rapid expansion of the school’s student numbers and a recognition of the need to frame the curriculum to meet the needs of the school’s changing student profile. The expanded second-level curriculum that has resulted from this increase in student and teacher numbers has enabled the school to compete on a more even basis with other second-level providers in the area. Courses offered at PLC level are determined by market demand and public awareness of Portlaoise College’s profile as a longstanding provider of further education programmes in the area.

The current first-year classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis and senior management plans to extend mixed-ability groupings to all junior cycle classes over the next two years. The revised groupings will allow for setting in the core subjects of Irish, English and Mathematics after first year. This decision is welcome and is clearly linked to strategies to promote attainment and retention under the school’s DEIS plan. Subject departments will need to consider the impact of the change in subject plans and agree appropriate teaching and learning methodologies that will maximise the benefits of this change for students.

Management is also reviewing the range of subjects taken by junior cycle students. History and Geography, which are currently optional, will be included within junior cycle core provision from next year. This is a very good decision as it maintains consistency with the students’ experience of the primary curriculum and it will strengthen the link with senior cycle provision in the subjects. French is a recent introduction to the core curriculum for junior cycle students. Second and third-year students, except those in the lowest stream class, take French as part of their core provision. Management is advised to review this
decision in light of the other changes to be introduced. One option to be considered is to continue to include French within the first-year programme but provide it as an option after that. This would require appropriate guidance support to provide advice to students as to the long-term consequences of subject choices.

On completion of junior cycle students are offered two options for progression at senior cycle, either the established Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The majority of students meet the programme requirements for the LCVP and the guidance department and programme co-ordinator work closely together to ensure that all LCVP compliant students opt for the programme. The selection by students of senior cycle optional subjects from pre-set bands is a determining factor in ensuring high participation rates in the LCVP. In addition, the provision of a language module for students who may not have taken Junior Certificate French ensures that the programme requirements are met by students. Presently, it is reasonable to adopt this approach of promoting the LCVP in light of the subject profile of students entering senior cycle. However, it is recommended that this strategy be revisited on an annual basis in the context of school development planning to ensure that its rationale remains valid. This will be essential as the subject profile of students entering senior cycle changes as a result of the ongoing developments in the junior cycle curriculum beginning to take effect.

There is a good range of subjects on offer at both junior and senior cycle. Management recognises that there is scope to improve continuity between junior and senior cycle provision in the science and business options. There are plans to extend the range of science options at senior cycle which is good given that science is part of core provision in junior cycle. As business is a strong point in PLC provision, and given the high profile of the LCVP within the curriculum, further promotion of business subjects at senior cycle should also be considered.

First-year students get a chance to sample the optional subjects for a limited period after which a letter is sent to the students and their parents where they are asked to indicate their subject preferences. Good efforts are made to accommodate the majority of preferences. In the case of senior cycle, students receive an input from the guidance department in third year. The students are asked in August before the start of the school year to select two optional subjects from three bands. The school indicated that students could change options after the students receive their Junior Certificate results and this was confirmed during interviews with students.

Currently decisions in relation to levels at which subjects are taken at examination is generally reached in consultation with the subject teacher. Further engagement of parents in respect of decisions about subject level could be considered as a way of encouraging increased parental involvement in decisions relating to student academic progress.

Overall the school is advised to monitor and evaluate the current curricular interventions and changes that have been introduced to improve attainment, as part of it self-evaluation process. In doing so the management team should reflect on the needs of staff in meeting objectives and the appropriate supports that are required to ensure success, including promoting student expectations and support for ensuring the appropriate range of teaching methodologies are used.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

The promotion of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is an area of ongoing development in the school’s provision. Traditionally co-curricular activities have centred on individual subject departments and reflected the strengths and interests of the subject teachers. In extending the learning experiences beyond the formal classroom, subject
teachers have endeavoured to engage students’ learning through activities that include projects, competitions, field trips, seminars and outside visits, including theatre visits. Many subject departments have developed a co-curricular programme that supports learning in their subject area but there is scope to extend the range of co-curricular provision.

Of particular significance in the school’s senior cycle provision is the LCVP. One of the underlying principles of the programme is the promotion and exploration of cross-curricular links between the students’ vocational subject groupings (VSGs) and the Link Modules. To date the development of cross-curricular links has been informal and centred on the teachers of business and the Link Modules. Therefore there is scope to build on this practice and review and formalise cross-curricular links between subject departments, especially those departments involved in the delivery of the VSGs.

Recently the school’s management has encouraged the development of a whole-school approach towards improving the range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. The extension of subject options, for example the introduction of Music, has provided the impetus for the production of a student talent show and school carol service. Increased use has also been made of the school’s sports facilities including the basketball courts and an excellent running track. The school management’s decision to keep first-year students onsite at lunchtime was partly influenced by a desire to improve the range of activities available and to increase students’ engagement with extracurricular provision. This approach is beginning to pay dividends as involvement in activities has improved. As it is planned to extend the lunchtime requirement to remain onsite to more year groups, this should further improve students’ involvement with the extracurricular provision.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning structures are firmly established and subject-planning co-ordinators are in place. Regular planning meetings are held and it is evident that subject department planning is derived from, and reinforces, effective collaboration between the members of the subject departments. Valuable subject planning also takes place during numerous informal meetings. The position of subject-planning co-ordinator rotates between the members of each department. This is very good practice as it contributes to the teachers’ professional development and provides them with an opportunity to contribute to the development of the departments. The effectiveness of subject department planning was illustrated by the manner in which the teachers collaborated in delivering common programmes and common assessments.

The activities of the subject departments are informed by comprehensive written plans. In one instance the plan features exemplary schemes of work which focus on learning outcomes, specify the key skills to be achieved by each year group and include the teaching methods to be adopted. This approach to preparing schemes of work should inform the review of subject department plans across all subject areas and particular attention should be given to detailing how differentiated teaching and assessment for learning can be used as key vehicles to enhance teaching and learning.

Analysis of student performance in the state examinations is carried out by management and the outcomes are circulated to the relevant subject departments. This good practice, which raises awareness of student attainment, allows the subject departments to examine underlying trends and facilitates long-term planning, should be conducted by individual departments as part of their ongoing subject planning.
Individual teacher planning is very good. The material covered in lessons was in line with the schedule contained in the relevant subject department plans. Resources necessary to facilitate lesson delivery were prepared in advance of the lessons and were, in most instances, very effectively integrated into teaching and learning.

4.2 Learning and teaching

It was noted by all inspectors that, in lessons observed, a positive atmosphere and good rapport and interaction between teachers and students were in evidence. Students were very well behaved and teachers are commended for their care for and consideration of students’ needs. As a result, there was a good learning environment. In all lessons, students were attentive and well behaved and, in the majority of lessons, they were very well engaged by their teachers in the learning process and there was a high level of purposeful communication in the classrooms. Teachers were always affirming of the students’ efforts.

Lessons had a clear focus and were, in most cases, well planned, had a good structure, were delivered with clarity and enthusiasm and featured smooth transitions between the various stages of the lessons. They also were linked with previous learning. In the best cases, the lessons’ objectives were explicitly shared with the students at the outset and time was set aside to summarise and review the content of the lessons prior to their conclusion. This very good practice should be adopted as standard practice by all teachers. There was appropriate use of specific subject terminology in all lessons. Lessons generally proceeded at a suitable pace. Good practice was seen when the teachers put learning in context for students by linking the topic of the lesson with contemporary life.

Teachers have to cater for a wide range of abilities in their classes. There was evidence of differentiation in the manner in which many lessons were conducted and students were given opportunities to achieve according to their abilities. In many instances, the students were appropriately challenged, regardless of their ability. This was achieved in a number of ways including differentiated teaching, the integration of resources, the use of group work supported by worksheets and excellent teacher questioning. In these lessons, teachers asked questions of named individuals and gave individual attention to students as required. It was noted in one subject area that when using directed questions, time should be allowed for students to compose their answers, thus encouraging all students to engage in this activity. A range of higher-order and lower-order questions was posed in the best lessons observed to check levels of knowledge and understanding and encourage students to think at a deeper level. As a result, students were engaged in discussion with their teacher and with each other and responded well to questions. In these lessons, students approached the tasks assigned to them with enthusiasm and contributed positively to the lessons by asking good questions and positively engaging with the lesson content. In these lessons, a high expectation for students’ achievement was apparent.

In some lessons, students were found not to be adequately challenged. Here the teachers were inclined to ask lower-order questions which failed to motivate the better able students and the pace of the lessons was too slow. In addition, sometimes there was an inclination to ask for hands up as opposed to naming students to answer questions. In these lessons, the content accommodated the students’ abilities rather than challenging them. It is recommended that, in all lessons, teachers ensure that they are stretching all their students and actively engaging them regardless of their ability and therefore there is a need to practise differentiation in all lessons.

A range of well-chosen and stimulating teaching methodologies was observed including teacher demonstrations and presentations in the case of practical subjects, discussion, use of worksheets, student practical activity, questioning, role play, mind mapping and the use of
ICT. The whiteboard was used well in many instances to record and summarise information. Students were encouraged to make use of wall charts, including key words in some instances, which is highly commended. ICT was also very well used in many instances although greater use of this resource for teaching and learning was recommended in one subject. Best practice was observed when there were opportunities throughout the lesson for student discussion and engagement with the lesson content.

There was a good balance between active-learning methodologies and teacher-centred presentations in many of the lessons observed. The tendency to rely on traditional methodologies and teacher talk was also observed in all subjects in some instances and this should be avoided, as it can reduce the level of active student participation and discourage students from thinking for themselves. It is recommended that active participation of students in their own learning should be facilitated whenever possible. In addition, traditional teaching methods which involve a lot of teacher talk are not particularly appropriate in circumstances where the students’ literacy skills are poor or where English is not their first language. It is therefore recommended that the approaches adopted in lesson delivery take due cognisance of the language and literacy needs of the students and, where such difficulties exist, greater emphasis should be placed on the use of visual media, including key words, and on active teaching and learning.

The practical work and group work that was undertaken was efficiently organised and implemented. The students demonstrated a mature approach to their work. Best practice was observed where teachers facilitated plenary sessions before and after this work, thus ensuring that the students clearly understood the purpose of the work and had an opportunity to discuss and rationalise their findings afterwards.

The quality of the students’ written work, evident from their homework copybooks and from their performance in the house examinations and class tests, was satisfactory in most subjects and lessons. Students were assigned homework at the conclusion of most lessons and homework practices were good in most subjects. In one subject area, there was evidence that students were not being assigned enough homework in some lessons. The assignment of regular and appropriate homework is vital if students’ learning is to be reinforced and improved. Senior management analyses the results in state examinations and it is clear that management is encouraging teachers to support more students to take a higher level. Subject departments should also conduct an analysis of students’ results in state examinations and compare these to previous years’ results to identify trends and plan for improvement.

4.3 Assessment

In general good homework management practices were apparent in the four subject departments inspected. However, there were notable instances of greater attention being needed in monitoring homework assignments. This is a compliance issue in relation to the whole-school homework policy that would benefit from management intervention, in light of the ongoing improvements in students engagement with learning.

In association with a focus on improving learning outcomes across all subject departments, expanding the range of assessment strategies and techniques at various stages of the students’ learning are tools that make teaching more effective. It is recommended that strategies of Assessment for learning (AfL) be widely adopted as a means of enhancing teachers’ capacity in monitoring student performance and responding to their learning needs. Comprehensive information on the principles of AfL can be found on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment at www.ncca.ie. Strategies for fuller implementation of these principles should be considered as a long-term whole-school task.
Formal examinations for non-certificate examination classes are held at Christmas and again prior to the summer holidays. Students in certificate examination classes sit a formal examination at Christmas and sit mock examinations in February each year. Additional informal testing, including end-of-term assessments, is carried out frequently and at the discretion of individual teachers. It is recommended that the good practice of setting common papers and correcting these in accordance with an agreed marking scheme, observed in several subjects, should be extended.

A range of mechanisms for communicating student progress and attainment to parents is in place. These include use of the student journal, parent-teacher meetings, and formal reports, along with telephone contact and formal letters, if the need arises. Individual reports are sent to parents presenting the results, with commentary by teachers, of Christmas and summer assessments for students in first, second and fifth years, and following Christmas and mock examinations for third-year and sixth-year students.

While there are some examples of good collaborative practice relating to assessment issues, standards and strategies, this varies across the subject departments. In the light of a whole-school drive to improve student outcomes, it is important that uniform analysis of student performance and attainment is achieved and that the assessment practices in use within subject departments are universally adopted by all teachers therein. It is desirable that all teachers contribute to the design and development of the assessment strategies and instruments. There is scope for improvement in this regard so that in every subject department individual teachers can work within a common, shared, consensually agreed assessment framework, with comparable grading standards and expectations. Establishing a shared assessment culture is an aspect of subject department practice that will progress from its current position because of the influence and support of senior management.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school’s provision for students with additional educational needs is very good. There are a substantial number of students that receive additional support and the actions of management and teachers in providing for the needs of these students shows great commitment and understanding. It was evident that the school has adopted a range of inclusive practices to meet the needs of its diverse student population.

There are well-established links with the main feeder primary schools. In-coming first-year students are assessed and the results of these assessments, along with information provided by feeder primary schools, are collated to identify students who require additional support. The special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator and the SEN team work together to profile the students and develop individual education plans (IEPs). The SEN co-ordinator keeps clear records on the allocation of additional support to students. The documentation provided by the SEN department to the inspectors clearly sets out how each student who had been allocated additional support was receiving that support. Further confirmation of the school’s commitment to deliver on supports for students with additional educational needs was provided by parents who stated that the school’s assurances to them in relation to supports for individual students were delivered.

Among the range of supports provided are smaller resource classes for English and Mathematics as well as individual or small-group support through withdrawal from other subject areas, for example where students do not take Irish or French. In addition to the school’s designated learning-support rooms, it also has a dedicated support unit for students with autism. The unit currently caters for two students and has an assigned support teacher.
and special needs assistant (SNA). The curriculum for the students in the support unit has been adapted and the school’s management is cognisant of the need to integrate the students for agreed activities as is appropriate to their needs.

Portlaoise College has three additional SNAs who have been assigned to work with students with specific care needs. The SNAs have an established role with staff and students and the SEN co-ordinator is responsible for planning with the SNAs and updating them with respect to students needs.

The school has a number of staff with specialist qualifications who work closely together and as part of the SEN team in planning for provision. Systems and procedures are in place to provide teachers with essential information and advice on the needs and abilities of students in their classes who are receiving additional support. The change to mixed-ability classes in junior cycle will mean some alteration to the current model of support to students with special educational needs but the team is well placed to use its experience to make this change which could, for example, involve increased focus on team teaching and withdrawal for students with very specific needs.

The student body reflects the diversity of the local community and includes students from minority and other groups including those for whom English is an additional language (EAL). The school has a significant number of EAL students. The interaction between students during the break times indicates the richness of this diversity but also reflects the challenge it sets for all within the school community. For EAL students, the school provides a range of targeted English language supports. These interventions include withdrawal, small resource groups, team teaching and whole-class supports.

The inspectors observed one example of excellent practice where team teaching between a subject-specialist teacher of business and the EAL support teacher was used with LCVP students. This in-class support was further supported through appropriate subject planning. It was evident that there is communication between the support teachers and subject teachers in relation to appropriate teaching aims and methodologies. School practice indicated that there was sharing of expertise and ongoing communication among staff that aimed to optimise the learning outcomes for EAL students. To further strengthen this practice, it is recommended that the existing in-school examples of best practice in subject planning for EAL are disseminated and replicated across all subject departments. Subject-specific lexicons, visual stimuli, expansion in the range of teaching methodologies and inclusion of specific learning outcomes in the subject plans are some of the techniques that will improve the range of language and literacy supports across the curriculum.

The school’s policy on EAL has been drafted under the guidance of the post holder with responsibility for EAL. As the needs of EAL students are changing, it is advised that this policy is kept under review especially as, increasingly, these students are transitioning from primary level having received language support in their primary school. A priority of both the HSCL co-ordinator and the parents’ council has been to improve the level of parental involvement in school activities of parents of EAL students. It is evident that the school endeavours to ensure that documentation provided to all parents, but especially the parents of these students, is clear and unambiguous.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school’s guidance allocation is used to provide a range of educational, personal and career supports for students. The school is allocated twenty-four ex-quota hours for Guidance and the department comprises two qualified guidance counsellors who play an important role in many aspects of school life including curriculum support and student care. When additional guidance allocation was received under Department of Education and
Skills regulations, it was specifically targeted to support incoming first-year students to improve their transition to second level as is consistent with the Department’s advice. This student-centred approach is indicative of the focus on student care that is influencing the development of systems in the school.

Senior management is acutely aware of the challenge to the guidance department in meeting the diverse needs of the student population. The department provides services to both mainstream and PLC students and, though supported in providing guidance services to PLC students by the programme co-ordinators, there are challenges posed by this dual role. In acknowledging this challenge, the school’s management has decided that planned intermittent classroom interaction, rather than timetabled classes, would be a more effective use of the guidance allocation. Currently there are a small number of timetabled guidance classes mainly at senior cycle and relating to LCVP. The planned change in focus in the use of the guidance resource will require effective planning and suitable programmes for intermittent guidance classes will need to be drawn up. In the case of junior-cycle classes, this may be achieved through appropriate links with the Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) and Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE) programmes and at senior cycle with the LCVP programme. SPHE is timetabled in accordance with circular M11/03.

The school’s guidance plan is currently under review and is expected to be ratified by the board within the current school year. The guidance plan has been drafted to reflect the DEIS plan and details the systems and data required for analysing outcomes linked to the DEIS priorities. The plan should also reflect the objectives and outcomes expected from the move to planned intermittent classes and how the existing guidance programmes will be delivered to students. Regular review of the plan will be required to meet the changing needs of the school and students.

Students can avail of guidance and counselling support throughout their time in the school. They can seek referral through year heads, class tutors and teachers. Facilities for Guidance are very good. A dedicated guidance office is provided within the school. It is suitably equipped and well located to allow full access to students wishing to make appointments to meet with the guidance counsellors to seek information on career or personal issues. The office is adjacent to a dedicated classroom with up-to-date ICT facilities.

It was evident during the evaluation that Guidance within the school was viewed as a whole-school activity and was integrated into all the school’s planning and care systems. The guidance plan also indicates that provision of support for students at key transition stages at both junior and senior cycle is a priority. Some personal counselling support for students is provided but, when deemed necessary, students are referred, after consultation with parents and the student care structures, to relevant agencies and supports.

Student care was identified as a priority area for development by the principal on taking up her appointment. In the short time since that appointment a great deal of progress has been achieved. Key to this progress has been the support of staff in agreeing the changes and their level of engagement with the revised systems for example the code of behaviour. During the evaluation it was clear that there was a greater degree of consistency among teachers in implementing the code of behaviour. However, one area for development in applying the code is the range of sanctions used by teachers. Greater consistency is required in the application of sanctions by teachers. Also, sanctions used should centre on additional structured work that will provide additional scope to reward positive behaviour rather than on punitive mechanisms such as writing lines.

The second step was that care structures were revised and roles and responsibilities agreed. The new student care system centres on the relationship between year heads, class tutors and class teachers. Primary responsibility for the achievement of the pastoral goals of the
school rests with the class teacher, as is appropriate. However, the existence of an appropriate referral mechanism, in particular the introduction of year heads, has proven pivotal in transforming the care system. Interactions with the board, parents and students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the revised approach to student care.

A well organised care team is in place. The team meets weekly and comprises key members of the school staff including the principal and guidance counsellor. Year heads attend the care team meeting in rotation and recent changes to the format of recording the minutes of the group are welcome. Additional support for student care is provided by the attendance co-ordinator funded by the School Completion Programme (SCP). Reflecting the school’s range of supports, a sub-care team also exists including the HSCL co-ordinator and SCP co-ordinator. Part of the focus of the sub-care group is to co-ordinate the range of supports it can provide to the care team in individual cases. Senior management has a strong understanding of the appropriate linkages and interactions of the range of supports available to the school. This understanding has been critical in ensuring that the supports provided by HSCL and SCP work effectively in targeting the priority areas and support the DEIS action plans. The SCP has clearly defined areas of involvement with the school to support the target students.

Under the direction of the new management team there has been an improved focus on celebrating student achievement at a whole-school level. New criteria have been agreed for the student awards and four award periods in the school year have been established. The system has been linked to the pastoral care system and class tutors play a pivotal role in applying the criteria and implementing the system. In addition to school awards nights, there has been an increased focus on using the student journal to note merits so that there is ongoing communication with parents in relation to student progress. The focus on positive behaviour also extends to the SCP where participation on the annual tour is linked to good behaviour.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The good quality relationships among and between the staff and the students and the good behaviour of the students evidenced during the evaluation characterise the positive atmosphere that permeates the school. The school’s management team is also cognisant of the differing needs of both mainstream and PLC students and strives to meet the differing needs of both cohorts.

- The prioritisation by the principal of the review of the school’s code of behaviour and the refinement of its care structures has allowed the board greater time to discuss and prioritise other whole-school issues.

- There is a high level of goodwill towards the new senior management team, whose members provide effective leadership to the school community. The school’s staff has engaged positively with the change agenda that the management team has progressed quickly since their appointment.

- The recent experience of developing the DEIS plan indicates that the capacity for self-review and evaluation exists at school level. The change to mixed-ability groupings in first year is a positive step in promoting the DEIS objective of improved attainment through class provision.
• The facilities in the school are excellent and extending the requirement that mainstream students remain onsite at lunchtime should further improve student’s involvement with extracurricular provision.

• Students in every year group receive one period per week of instruction in ICT where the emphasis is on the development of basic ICT literacy and skills.

• There was a good balance between active-learning methodologies and teacher-centred presentations in many of the lessons observed.

• The school’s provision for students with additional educational needs is very good and under the direction of the new management team there has been an improved focus on celebrating student achievement at a whole-school level.

• The existence of an appropriate referral mechanism, in particular the introduction of year heads, has proven pivotal in transforming the care system.

• Senior management has a strong understanding of the appropriate linkages and interactions of the range of supports available to the school.

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

• To improve the board of management’s knowledge of the day-to-day operation of the school, the board should seek annual inputs from those involved in school development planning and from the students’ council.

• As the board has been recently constituted, it is an appropriate time to ensure that all board members are apprised of their obligations under the terms of the governing legislation and that opportunities that arise for training for board members should be availed of by members of the board even if they have served on previous boards.

• The next review of posts of responsibility should prioritise the overall co-ordination of PLC provision.

• Senior and middle management must ensure that the systems for reviewing outcomes from the DEIS plan are effective and that staff engage with the necessary continuing professional development required to implement the objectives of the plan.

• Where teachers’ competencies are such that they can teach in both mainstream and PLC provision, it is in their interest and the school’s that they should be deployed in both areas.

• In pursuance of the DEIS plan objectives, it is recommended that the school initiate planning for the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and that subject plans include detail on how differentiated teaching and assessment for learning can be used as key vehicles to enhance teaching and learning.

• It is recommended that, in all lessons, teachers ensure they are challenging all their students and actively engaging them, regardless of their ability. Therefore there is a
need to plan for and adopt teaching methodologies that support differentiation at all available opportunities.

- It is recommended that the approaches adopted in lesson delivery take due cognisance of the language and literacy needs of the students and where such difficulties exist greater emphasis should be placed on the use of visual media, including key words, and on active teaching and learning.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and deputy principal and the 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 Science and Biology – published June 2009
- Subject Inspection of Art – 19 January 2010
- Subject Inspection of English – 20 January 2010
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 19 January 2010

"Published, February 2011"