Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School
Clonakilty, County Cork
Roll number: 62170B

Date of inspection: 4 May 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Sacred Heart Secondary School was undertaken in May 2010. 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 was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects (see section 7 for details). The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Sacred Heart is a girls’ voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of CEIST - Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. The school was founded in 1941 by the Mercy Order as a day and boarding school. The school was originally housed in the convent building until the completion of a new school building on the campus in 1983. Both buildings were then connected by an enclosed glazed corridor at first-floor level. This facilitated easy access for students and teachers to teaching areas, offices and the refectory in the former boarding school building. At the time of this whole-school evaluation, the continued use of these facilities was uncertain as the Mercy Order has put the convent building up for sale.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The work of the school is grounded in a mission statement based on inclusive Christian values that aims to facilitate the holistic development of all students within a school community. Care, respect and positive relationships are central to the culture and atmosphere of the school. The achievement of high academic standards reflects the care and attention to the individual needs of students, in a warm and positive school and classroom atmosphere. The image of the school as a large family in which the individual is valued and whose needs are appropriately addressed was articulated by a number of students and parents in the course of the evaluation. Teachers, school management, administrative staff, special-needs assistants, cleaning and caretaking staff share a common purpose of care and support for students and work together for the benefit of all students within the school community.

It is clear that the mission statement and the characteristic spirit of the school are reflected both in the daily routines and procedures in the school and in the policies and school-planning process that inform these procedures. The work of both the board of management and CEIST is also reflected in the mission statement and both strive to develop and sustain educational quality in the school. The board is appropriately engaged with the ongoing issues and challenges of managing a vibrant school and the trustees provide a supportive surrounding framework aiming to promote spiritual development, quality in teaching and learning, respect, community and justice and responsibility in relationships.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted, meets regularly and is actively engaged in its role. The current board, now in its third year, is composed of some members who have served for many years and others who have been appointed more recently. All are clearly informed about and connected to the work of the school and to the community
within which they operate and serve. Board members are aware of their role and obligations under legislation and regulation, and have received appropriate training from their nominating bodies. It is clear from the minutes of recent meetings that the principal’s report to the board is comprehensive and serves to familiarise the board with the detail of school activities, students’ achievements and the work and contribution of all members of the school community. The principal and deputy principal play a significant and appropriate role in linking the board to the daily and ongoing activities of the school and to the students within the school community. Communication between the board and the parents’ association, the teachers and CEIST is agreed, well-organised and appropriate. This represents very good practice.

While the current work of the board has been dominated by securing sustained access to, and the refurbishment of, the teaching areas and other facilities in the former boarding school building, board members also have clear priorities for the continued development and improvement of the school. These include a focus on the enhancement of teaching and learning in the school and the further development of the co-curricular and extracurricular programme provided to students. The board and the principal have also outlined specific developmental priorities including the review of existing school policies and the development of additional policy areas as required by new and changing circumstances. In this context, it is recommended that the board revisit some of the wording of the current admissions policy to provide a more secure policy framework to address any future trends in enrolment.

The complexity of issues surrounding the occupancy and long-term use of the facilities of the former boarding school has been a recent and urgent concern of the board. While this building has been placed on the market, access to the areas used by the school was further affected by serious flood damage due to broken water pipes caused by the severe weather during the winter of 2009-2010. The flood damage resulted in the need to vacate a significant area of the building for up to six months. During this time, the school provided temporary alternative accommodation for these classes, mainly within existing resources. The flood-damaged facilities were being refurbished at the time of the evaluation.

The board has been in communication with the Southern Province of the Mercy Order, the Department of Education and Skills and CEIST in an attempt to secure sustained access to the facilities of the former boarding school. Access to facilities provided in this building, including general classrooms, a guidance suite, offices, an art room, a home-economics room and science laboratories, is essential to the delivery of the curriculum to students. The current refurbishment, funded by an insurance claim due to the flooding, will be completed for the commencement of the 2010-2011 school year. However, to sustain the curricular provision of the school and the delivery of the curriculum in appropriate facilities, it is essential that issues around sustained access to and the use of these facilities are clarified.

### 1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal are a very recently appointed management team and demonstrate very effective leadership of the school. The principal was appointed in 2009 as the first permanent lay principal in the school since its foundation. This, combined with the appointment of a new deputy principal from outside of the school community at the same time, represents a significant change in a school

The principal and deputy principal are a very effective management team. Both have completed leadership training programmes provided by Leadership Development for Schools (LDS). While both have specific roles and a visible presence on the school corridors, it is clear that teamwork, communication, interaction, moral purpose and situational awareness characterise their leadership of the school. Their adjoining offices and
open-door symbolise their team approach to the challenge of leading the school and managing issues as they arise. Although both are in their first year of appointment, their leadership of the school has been impacted upon by the demands and uncertainty relating to the boarding-school building and the recent refurbishment following the flood damage.

Notwithstanding these immediate challenges, the principal demonstrates a clear vision for the leadership of the school into the future. As a longstanding staff member and former deputy principal, this vision is informed by the long-established traditions and the significant achievements of the school, and by clear and achievable priorities for the future. These priorities concern the leadership of learning in terms of focusing on outcomes for students and the development of teaching and learning in the classroom. Leadership of people in the school includes the prioritising of continuing professional development (CPD), the empowering of individuals to lead specific projects and the support for and communication with all members of staff including teachers, secretarial staff, special-needs assistants, catering, cleaning and caretaking staff members. This vision also includes a change agenda focusing on policy revision, subject-development planning, and the maintenance and enhancement of the ethos of care that pervades the work of the school.

The deputy principal plays a pivotal role in all aspects of management and leadership. Issues relating to the day-to-day management of staff and students, the effective operation of the timetable and the ladder of referral in the discipline and pastoral-care system, fall within the remit of the deputy principal. It is clear that, while both principal and deputy principal have individual and specific duties and responsibilities, it is their team work and ability to communicate that shapes their very effective leadership of the school.

Leadership in the school is also distributed at middle-management level. Assistant principals and special-duties teachers carry out a range of duties attached to their posts. They play a key role in the pastoral care and education-support structures and in the co-ordination of the Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. It was clear from the observation of team meetings that post-holders are actively engaged in their roles and co-operate effectively with school management to the benefit of students in the school. A recent review of post duties has been completed in an open and inclusive manner. This has served to clarify duties, identify needs and streamline the middle-management structure. Post holders meet as a group on a number of occasions during the year and liaise with the principal on the performance of their duties. The focus on fostering distributed leadership at middle-management level represents very good practice and should be further promoted to meet the changing needs of the school community.

Student management and care structures are clearly reflected in the ethos of the school community. Enrolment procedures are in line with the admissions policy and are well organised and managed. Advance information in the form of an enrolment pack containing enrolment forms, the school prospectus and a summary of the code of behaviour is provided to students seeking to enrol. School visits to local primary schools by the principal, followed by an open-night in the school, are used to familiarise new students and their parents with the facilities, programmes and activities on offer in the school. On submission of the enrolment form, students and their parents are invited to an interview with the principal or deputy principal to discuss individual student needs and the procedures and supports in place in the school. The school’s guidance counsellor and year head for first year also play an appropriate role in the enrolment process. A peer-mentoring programme plays an important role in the induction, care and support of new students. Appropriate attention is also paid to attendance and to retention of students. Communication between school and home is well established through the use of the student journal, telephone contacts as required, and by letter when necessary. These strategies
support high standards of attendance. This has been enhanced recently by a system using text-messaging to inform parents of daily absences and other such issues. These processes and systems are very effective.

Inclusion is central to the school’s ethos and is clearly lived out in daily activities and interactions. Students with additional educational needs, including those from minority groups and those for whom English is an additional language, are included and appropriately supported in their engagements in school. The pastoral-care team, the education-support team and the guidance team are central to the support for students. Communication within and between these groups and between these groups and school management is of very good quality and is effective in identifying and supporting the needs of individual students.

The code of behaviour has been audited and reviewed recently. The student council and the parents’ association, in discussions with the evaluation team, see the outcome of the audit, in the form of a revised code, as fair and positive. The colourful and accessible document has a visibility in the school and is presented in terms of encouraging positive behaviour and explaining the rationale for sanctions. It also presents a clear ladder of referral and assigns roles and responsibilities to the class teacher, year head, deputy principal, and principal. The structure and content of the code and the inclusive process involved in its revision represents very good practice.

The student council is actively engaged in its role as a voice for students. The council has developed a constitution, is representative of all year groups and organises elections to the council on an annual basis. Appropriate structures, including an executive group, meeting procedures, a notice board and a suggestion box, are in place to facilitate the very good work undertaken. The council has had an active role in school policy planning and development, most recently in the revision of the code of behaviour where three council members sat on the review committee. Members also act in a representative role for the student body at important school events. The student council has undertaken very good work to date, particularly in relation to its engagement in important school activities appropriate to its role.

Engagement and communication with parents is of good quality and operates through facilitating individual appointments with parents and through the well-established parents' association. Parents can access school management and individual teachers at the initial interview on enrolment, by appointment, and at parent-teacher meetings. Of particular note is the quality of the school’s website which provides a range of photographs of school activities and important information for parents.

The parents’ association, established in 1984, actively supports the work of school management and has taken an appropriate role in policy development. The association operates under its constitution and is affiliated to the National Parents’ Council (Post-Primary). The association elects its own executive group and works with a designated post-holder as the liaison person with school management. The association has a long history of support for the school and is a significant element of the school community.

The school has established a wide range of links with the community and outside agencies to support its work and students’ learning. These links support the curriculum across a range of subjects and through the TY programme and LCVP in relation to work experience placements and social and community involvements. School management and the care team have also established significant links with external student-support agencies to assist students including those with additional educational needs and those from minority groups. These links and supports are appropriate and effective and are kept under review by school management and by the individual teams involved.
A culture of review is embedded in the school community. The school’s involvement in the pilot phase of whole-school evaluation in 1998 stimulated much reflection and a focus on school self-evaluation. These processes have become significant particularly in the context of the changes in management in recent years. The review and analysis of the outcomes of student assessments and of certificate examinations have been ongoing for a number of years. It is clear from the introduction of new programmes, from the review agenda in terms of school policies and procedures, and from the work of teams in the school, that the focus of reflection, evaluation and review has been on school improvement and on improved outcomes for students.

1.4 Management of resources

The school calendar complies with the required number of teaching days in the school year. There is a very small discrepancy regarding the number of instruction hours provided for students in the school week. Currently, the school timetable provides for twenty-seven hours and fifty-five minutes instruction per week. To comply with CL 29/95, *Time in School*, students should be provided with twenty-eight hours instruction per week. This very small loss of teaching time is compounded by the provision of a staff meeting time, when required, but normally on one afternoon per week. By reducing the lesson time in the afternoon by five minutes per lesson a twenty-minute meeting time is created. This erodes the instruction time for students when its impact is calculated across a full school year. While it is accepted that this meeting time is used purposefully, students should be in receipt of their full entitlement of twenty-eight hours of instruction each week. Both the principal and the board have committed to rectifying this situation in the construction of the timetable for the next and future school years.

Teaching staff is appropriately allocated in line with good practice. Future staffing needs are addressed by school management as needs arise and in relation to its clear planning priorities. Inspectors noted the large number of teachers involved in the delivery of Mathematics and English. School management should consider the creation of smaller core teaching teams for these subject areas.

Support staff is engaged and included in the activities of the school community. The caretaking, cleaning, and administrative staff play an important and appropriate role in the school and display a significant commitment to the whole school beyond the requirements of their respective duties. Relationships and communication among and between this group and other staff members and school management are very positive.

The special-needs assistants, referred to in the school as *student assistants*, play an equally significant role in the care and support structures in the school. These assistants carry out their duties appropriately in supporting the needs of their assigned students. They also have a voice in the school and communicate with, and are consulted by the principal and deputy principal, on issues relating to their role. Their involvement in extracurricular activities with the students they support is particularly acknowledged.

The existence and the encouragement of teams is a very effective strategic resource in the management and leadership of the school. Teams are co-ordinated by staff members in leadership roles and are characterised by collaboration towards improving the experience of the student in the school and in the classroom. Programme, subject, year-group and student teams were observed in the course of the evaluation. Their work was well organised and was informed by the principles of care, support for students and high academic expectations that characterise the school community. The professional commitment of teachers and other staff members to their work in the school community is acknowledged. This commitment was particularly highlighted in meeting the challenges caused by the disruption and
relocation of class groups, and the damage to facilities and material resources, caused by the serious flooding incident in the school in 2010.

The school has an extensive and appropriate range of facilities including general classrooms, specialist rooms, laboratories, a general purposes area and offices. The school has an impressive sports hall, an all-weather pitch and daytime access to a community sports facility that adjoins the school. A good quality school library is also in place. These facilities are well maintained. A number of pre-fabricated classrooms have also been provided in the past as enrolment expanded. The refurbishment of the flood-damaged areas of the boarding school building will result in the reinstatement of the science laboratories, a number of other teaching areas and offices.

Significant investment has been made in information and communication technology (ICT), and progress in its integration into teaching and learning and in school administration is advancing. The school has two computer rooms, and data-projectors and laptop computers are available in a significant number of teaching areas. An acceptable-use policy for ICT is in place, in line with good practice. An interactive whiteboard is in use in the geography room. The integration of ICT into teaching and learning showed significant variation, with some very good practice in evidence in the lessons observed in particular subject areas. Further appropriate integration into teaching and learning is encouraged as an aspect of the school’s focus on developing learning and teaching practice.

A safety audit and safety statement has been completed in the school. The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has also completed a safety inspection in 2010. School management and appropriate subject departments should update the subject-specific audits already in place in line with the findings of the HSA inspection report. Issues relating to the storage of gas in the demonstration room, as outlined in the science subject inspection report appended to this report, should be addressed. Similarly, a subject specific audit should be completed in the context of the relocation of some subjects to alternative teaching areas during the refurbishment of the flood-damaged facilities.

Projects in relation to environmental responsibility and sustainability are ongoing in the school. This work is in evidence through the efforts of a green school committee and participation in the Green Flag environmental award. Currently this committee is supported in its work by the student council and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) class groups.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The school has a long-established and very effective planning process. There has been visible continuity in the process as the management team changed. It is clear that school development planning is linked to school improvement. A school plan is in place and clear developmental priorities have been identified in line with the changing needs of the school and its students.

A range of required policies has been developed over time and are in place and these inform processes and procedures in the school. These policies contain ratification dates in line with good practice. The review and revision of these policies now forms an element of the school’s development priorities. Planning has been inclusive and collaborative and has included the board, teachers, parents and the student council. This represents very good practice. Of particular note is the very positive outcome of the recent revision of the code of behaviour.
Immediate, medium and longer-term planning priorities are outlined in the school plan. Immediate priorities include the revision of the admissions, attendance and student support policies. Medium-term priorities include the revision of the anti-bullying policy and longer-term planning priorities include a focus on restorative justice and the integration of assistive technologies. The board is supportive of this extended view of school-development planning as it represents a clear vision for the future development of the school. It is recommended however that the development and completion of a relationships and sexuality education (RSE) policy should become an immediate priority.

The priorities identified link the permanent section and the developmental section of the school plan as it is the lived interactions and experiences of the students that inform effective planning. Developmental needs are identified as they arise from the daily routines and practices in the school and in classrooms. Planning to enhance and develop the quality of teaching and learning features strongly among the developmental priorities including a focus on professional learning relating to differentiated learning strategies and the integration of ICT into classroom practice.

Good quality subject planning was in evidence in the subject areas evaluated. To build on the impressive planning process that is ongoing in the school, it is recommended that subject-department planning, including TY subject planning, be developed and strengthened particularly in the area of learning and teaching. Subject departments should focus on the learning experience of the student in the classroom as the guiding principle of their planning. They should reflect upon and share the good practice that already exists within the school and seek to access available external supports as the planning process develops. Finally, as planning progresses the development of a whole-school inclusion policy could be used as a lens through which to view and test the inclusive nature of all school activities.

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, 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

Students in the school are offered the Junior Certificate, the TY programme, the Leaving Certificate, the LCA and the LCVP. The gradual introduction over time of the TY programme, LCA and LCVP within the curricular framework, reflects a clear emphasis on curricular planning to meet the changing needs of students. The TY programme was introduced in 1984, followed by the LCVP in 1994 and the LCA in 1998. A repeat Leaving Certificate class, to cater for boys as well as girls, was introduced in 1996 but was phased out in 2002. The school currently offers the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) to facilitate adult students to return to education and the work place. These engagements with new opportunities to the benefit of students represent good practice and reflect the school’s long-term engagement with school development planning.
A comprehensive range of subjects is offered to students on enrolment and as they progress through the school. In first year, students are offered: English; Irish; Mathematics; History; Geography; Science; Physical Education (PE); Religious Education (RE); Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE); CSPE; German; French; Art; Business Studies; Music; Technology; Home Economics (HE) and Speech and Drama. The availability of the full range of subjects in first year, as a means of informing students’ choices for Junior Certificate, is good practice. All classes are created as mixed-ability groups while concurrent timetabling of Mathematics, Irish and English in second and third year allows for the creation of class groups of different ability levels and facilitates movement between levels.

The compulsory TY programme provides a varied and interesting curriculum that is reviewed on a regular basis. Leaving Certificate students are offered English, Irish, Mathematics, PE and RE as core subjects with History, Geography, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Accounting, Business, Art, HE, French, German, Design and Communications Graphics (DCG) and Music as optional subjects. LCA is appropriately timetabled, as is the LCVP. The link modules and other required aspects of the LCVP are provided for in the timetable, as are all the required elements of the LCA programme.

School management should resolve issues of provision and timetabling identified during the evaluation. Provision for SPHE to first-year students, in line with Circular M11/03, and as recommended in the separate SPHE subject inspection report, should be addressed. Similarly, issues relating to the spread of lessons in some subjects throughout the week, the impact that the timetabling of Speech and Drama on Fridays only has on the timetable, and the slightly reduced provision for Irish in first year, should be addressed. The timetabling of double periods for the sciences across break times should also be addressed. Consideration could be given to the movement of the morning break time to facilitate two class periods before and four after the break. The reverse could also pertain. Either option would facilitate double classes for practical subjects and discontinue the current situation of some students taking their morning break in the middle of a double practical lesson. These issues were highlighted to school management and are to be resolved within the timetabling for the school year 2010/2011 and thereafter.

All of the programmes on offer are appropriately organised, co-ordinated and delivered. Access to programmes is informed by openness and equality. Subject folders, programme plans and the observation of team meetings illustrate a commitment by teachers to the effective delivery of the programmes and to their review and evaluation. Teachers have high expectations for students balanced with a care and concern for the individual.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

The organisation of the subject-choice process in the school represents very good practice. A sampling system is used in first year within which students are afforded the opportunity to study the full range of subjects. On transfer into second year, students are asked to choose either French or German and then to identify three subjects to study to Junior Certificate from Science, Art, Business Studies, Music, Technology and HE. This open choice is based on a survey of students’ preferences.

In TY students study all available subjects and modules. They choose between engagement in a mini-company or the Young Social Innovators project. The programme also provides an important subject-sampling function in advance of the subject-choice process on transfer into fifth year.

Fifth-year students are also offered an open choice of programmes and subjects. Students undertaking the Leaving Certificate and LCVP are surveyed to identify their preferred
subject-option combinations. From these initial choices, and with reference to available resources, subject-option blocks are created and from these students make their final choices. Access to the LCVP and LCA is informed by appropriate information, guidance and consultation.

All aspects of the programme-choice and subject-choice processes are well organised and are informed by appropriate information in the form of letters to home and documentation clearly setting out the options available. Parents’ meetings are organised and individual consultation with parents and individual students is facilitated to inform this process. The school’s guidance counsellor is actively engaged at each transition stage to assist students in making informed choices.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

The school offers an extensive co-curricular and extracurricular programme involving cultural, sports, and social and personal-development activities. Music features strongly and is seen as an element of the tradition and heritage of the school. The school has a traditional music group, a number of choirs and presents an annual high-profile musical production. Sports available to students include hockey, football, camogie, athletics, tennis and basketball. Students are also engaged in quiz competitions, debating and public speaking. The Young Social Innovators project, engagement with the West Cork Mental Health Service, development aid projects, the work of the student council and a range of other projects involve students in social and personal development activities. The school has gained significant recognition through successes, at regional level in public speaking and at national level at the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition.

The whole-school evaluation team acknowledges the commitment of teachers, special-needs assistants and school management in organising and facilitating students in engaging in these valuable activities.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Very good quality planning and preparation for teaching and learning was observed in the subjects evaluated. Sustainable planning structures have been established that reflect progress made in whole-school development planning. Subject departments are well established and subject co-ordinators are in place. These roles are rotated, in line with good practice, to allow the skills and competences of team members to develop and to facilitate distributed leadership. Subject meetings take place on a regular basis and minutes are kept to record the topics discussed and the actions planned.

An outcome of this good quality planning practice is the development of comprehensive subject plans in the subject areas evaluated. The plans include details of programmes of work, cross-curricular links, and details of common assessments. In some cases, intended learning outcomes and teaching methodologies are also included. The subject plans also show the extent of linkage and communication between the subject departments, individual teachers and the education-support team in the school. These are very positive elements of subject planning. It is clear that subject planning is defined by very good quality collaboration and communication between colleagues.

To build on the impressive achievements in subject planning to date, subject departments should enhance their focus on how collaborative subject planning can impact positively on the quality of teaching and on the students’ learning experience in lessons. To this end a
number of recommendations are made. In all subject areas, more detailed intended learning outcomes should be included for each element or module of the programme of work within the plan. In some subjects, key skills, to be acquired by students, should be included in each element of the programme of work, while in others, the inclusion of teaching methodologies and teaching resources is recommended. In one subject area, it is recommended that units of work should be time bound to ensure that all class groups have engaged with the content area appropriate to the syllabus and the agreed programme of work.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching and learning was observed in lessons during the evaluation. Individual planning and preparation for lessons was found to be very good in almost all cases. Teachers’ preparation ensured that lessons’ progressed at a pace appropriate to the learning needs of the students. In most cases, lessons opened with a review of previous learning or in combination with a stimulus, activity or task, to focus on new learning. Students were engaged by the lessons and responded to the methodologies employed by their teachers. In some cases, it was noted that students were particularly engaged in their own learning through the challenge of individual, pair or small-group response to a topic, discussion or task. In these lessons, the students responded very positively to strategies that engaged them significantly in independent or semi-independent learning. The teachers facilitated learning through carefully planned strategies in these lessons. Such approaches were observed to be very effective.

While overall engagement, participation and learning was observed to be good, a number of developmental recommendations are made to further enhance methodologies and students’ engagement in lessons and in learning in some subject areas. Individual teachers should outline the learning intention(s) and the intended learning outcomes to be achieved and review these at the close of the lesson. This approach provides a scaffolding to support students’ learning by encouraging students, in combination with their teacher, to assess their own learning and whether the intended outcomes have been achieved in the lesson. This strategy should build from the recommendation relating to collaborative subject planning and result in further engagement by students in their own learning, by placing more responsibility on them to achieve the intended outcomes.

A further developmental recommendation also involves the engagement of students in learning through an increased use of a range of active teaching and learning methodologies. These methodologies and strategies include tasks, well-planned questioning, analysis and evaluation of topics, whole-class, group or pair discussion and response to stimulus materials. Such methodologies challenge students to engage, beyond simply listening to their teacher, and to become active participants in their learning. Students should be encouraged to develop skills of decision making and critical analysis. In one subject evaluated, a focus on developing key skills was recommended to actively engage students, while in another, teachers were encouraged to vary the teacher-directed methodology to further challenge students to be less passive and more active in their learning. Further integration of ICT into teaching and learning and the display of students’ work in classrooms could also assist in developing these approaches.

Classroom atmosphere and management were very positive in lessons. As observed in the school as a whole, the quality of communication, interaction, and the positive rapport between students and their teachers reflects care, commitment and concern for students’ progress and achievement. Teachers’ expectations of their students are high and achievement in certificate examinations is strong.
4.3 Assessment

Assessment practices follow normal procedures. Assessment of learning in lessons is achieved by questioning, by the review of homework and the assignment of specific tasks. Good assessment practices were evident in most lessons observed. These practices were in line with the school’s assessment policy. Homework was assigned, as appropriate, in all lessons and was monitored and annotated in almost all. It is important that homework is monitored and dated regularly for all class groups.

To develop practice in this area, teachers, in some subject areas, are encouraged to widen the modes of assessment used in lessons and in relation to homework. Formative assessment practices should be considered. Intended learning outcomes, based on recommendations relating to planning and classroom practice, should also be used to inform assessment in lessons and homework tasks. Peer and self-assessment strategies should be considered. In some instances, the level of challenge and appropriateness of homework tasks to the syllabus should also be considered. Formative comments should also be provided to students, on their copybooks and notebooks, at reasonable intervals, to affirm achievement and to provide direction for improvement. These assessment strategies should enhance existing practice.

Assessment practices in SPHE should also be developed over time but in a somewhat different direction, as these students do not face a terminal certificate examination. To build on current good practice, SPHE teachers are encouraged to develop an assessment toolkit and to consider the use of portfolio assessment, in line with syllabus guidelines. Using students’ feedback to evaluate and review learning outcomes is also suggested. The outcomes of this work, over time, should lead to the development of a subject-specific policy on assessment for SPHE.

Procedures for terminal assessment also follow established practices, as end-of-term examinations are provided for all class groups while third-year and sixth-year students sit pre-examinations in advance of their certificate examinations. Common assessment, in line with good practice in subject planning, is organised in subjects. Appropriate procedures are in place to communicate progress and outcomes to parents through the students’ journal, school reports and parent-teacher meetings.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

Policy and practice in meeting the needs of students with additional educational needs reflects the school’s mission statement and concern for the holistic development of the individual based on care, respect and positive relationships. Students with additional educational needs, including those with special educational needs, those for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and students from minority groups are well provided for, are appropriately supported and are included in the school community. A special educational needs team is actively engaged in this work and is very well co-ordinated. The commitment of this team is evidenced in the quality of planning, of the work undertaken, and in the lived, inclusive atmosphere of the school. Leadership for an inclusive school, as evidenced in the senior management team, also clearly informs this work.

Following enrolment, the review of assessments and reports, and interviews with parents, students with special educational needs are provided for at one of three levels of supports based on their needs. This represents good practice. Some students are provided with additional support through withdrawal from some lessons while other students are offered a
modified curriculum. These supports are offered following full consultation with parents and appropriate school staff. A special-class group, whose education is largely based in a specially equipped room in the school, is provided for students with special educational needs in the moderate range. This represents the third level of support. This room is referred to as An Tearmann Feasa (the sanctuary of knowledge).

This small group of students is supported by a team of teachers, special-needs assistants and a supervising teacher. This team is particularly effective in supporting and providing for the educational, social and physical needs of these students within a modified curriculum in the school community. Very effective work using ICT was in evidence in An Tearmann Feasa, where students were engaged in the production of a cookery book using digital images of the cooking process for recipes and in a poetry project linking with the works of Seamus Heaney. The students are also included in a range of subjects within mainstream classes and interact with the wider school during break times and on school activities. These interactions and engagements should be further developed over time, particularly through linkage with the TY programme to promote ongoing inclusive practices to the benefit of all students. The work and atmosphere evident in An Tearmann Feasa is a further reflection of the fabric of care and support for students in the school.

EAL students, those from minority groups and those who may be economically disadvantaged are appropriately supported both within the whole-school context and also by individual teachers. All these students are supported within the school’s care structures and a team of teachers has received additional in-service training in EAL teaching and learning strategies. A native Polish speaker is also engaged to work with Polish students in the school to improve their spoken English. Members of the Traveller community are appropriately supported by individual teachers, by the Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT) service and by the school’s involvement in the University College, Cork (UCC) Access Programme.

The range of supports provided is well organised, delivered appropriately and regularly reviewed. Re-testing and review of the outcomes of particular supports represents good practice as does the significant progress in developing individual learning profiles for students with special educational needs. The further development of this process is encouraged, particularly through the creation of a database of students that would record their individual needs, interventions and supports. This data should be appropriately protected but could be accessible to teachers of these students. Consideration should also be given to the introduction of a team-teaching model of intervention to limit the need to withdraw students from mainstream lessons.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The guidance allocation is used appropriately in the school to provide vocational, educational and personal Guidance to students, as required. This service is very well organised and is delivered in a positive, professional and proactive manner by the school’s guidance counsellor. Guidance plays a significant role in enrolment, in key transitions for students, and in relation to the selection of their chosen pathways as they leave the school. Guidance also features strongly in the work of the school’s care teams, in assessment of students, in subject choice and through the provision of personal counselling. The guidance counsellor is involved in communicating with parents either individually or at parents’ meetings at key times during the school year. Both parents and students spoke very positively, during the evaluation, of the quality of the guidance service provided by the school.

The guidance counsellor has an office base that is well equipped although this was damaged as a result of the flooding incident and was in the process of being refurbished
during the period of the evaluation. This refurbishment could also present an opportunity to further enhance the facilities to support Guidance in the school.

Whole-school guidance planning in significantly advanced. This very good practice has resulted in the re-focusing and effective targeting of the resource to areas of greatest impact. Engagement with the school’s care teams is a particular and significantly effective involvement for Guidance. Two care teams have been created to address student-support issues. One team operates in junior and another in senior cycle. These teams meet on a weekly basis and include the principal, deputy principal, the year heads, programme co-ordinators, the guidance counsellor and special educational needs co-ordinator. Meetings of these teams that were observed during the whole-school evaluation were focused, business-like and centred on identifying the educational, social and care needs of individual students. Appropriate actions agreed are undertaken by individuals members depending on the needs identified. Subsequent actions and outcomes are discussed and reviewed. Discussions and actions are minuted. This work is very effective in supporting and guiding students. This view was supported by comments from both parents and students. The work of these care teams represents very good practice.

Student support and care is evident in curricular terms in the provision of SPHE and in the quality of the work reported in the SPHE subject inspection report, appended to this report. It is also evident in the detail of the work of the student council in addressing personal development issues, in the provision of extra classes by teachers on a voluntary basis and in the organisation of evening study. Other evidence includes the impressive work of the peer-mentoring group and the provision of a good quality refectory area where students and teachers can have lunch and interact in a relaxed social setting.

The students in the school were seen to be articulate, respectful, confident, courteous and assertive. These qualities reflect the lived ethos of the school in terms of high expectations, comprehensive engagement with learning and care for the individual.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The board of management is appropriately constituted, meets regularly and is actively engaged in its role.
- Care, respect and positive relationships are central to the culture and atmosphere of the school.
- Good quality teaching and learning was observed in the lessons visited during the evaluation.
- Very good quality planning and preparation for teaching and learning was observed in the subjects evaluated.
- Students are offered a wide range of subjects and programmes within an open and well-organised subject-choice process.
- The school has long-established and very effective whole-school planning processes in place.
- Students with additional educational needs are well supported and included in the school community.
- The principal and deputy principal provide very effective leadership, the hallmarks of which are a strong commitment to team work and good communication.
- Guidance and support for students with additional educational needs are very well organised and are delivered in a positive, professional and proactive manner.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The development of an RSE policy should become an immediate planning priority.
- SPHE lessons should be provided to first-year students, in line with Circular M11/03.
- The further development of active teaching and learning methodologies is recommended.
- Assessment procedures should be strengthened in some subject areas.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and deputy principal and with 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 English – 5 May 2010
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 5 May 2010
- Subject Inspection of Science and Chemistry – 7 May 2010
- Subject Inspection of SPHE – 23 April 2010

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Sacred Heart would like to thank the Inspectors who carried out the Inspection for their professionalism, their courtesy, their genuine interest in the school. While the timing of the evaluation was not ideal, we thank them for their understanding during a time of great difficulty for the school community as a significant area of the school was not accessible due to extensive damage caused by burst pipes.

The Board is extremely pleased to welcome this very positive report. It affirms the dedication and commitment of all members of the school community who work consistently to maintain and promote such high standards as evidenced in the report. The description of the school as ‘large family’ in which an individual is valued and whose needs are appropriately addressed is one that is particularly gratifying to the board.

The Board is pleased that the report acknowledges that:

- Care, respect and positive relationships are central to the culture and atmosphere of the school. The achievement of high academic standards reflects the care and attention to the individual needs of students, in a warm and positive school environment.
- The mission statement and the characteristic spirit of the school are reflected both in the daily routine and procedures in the school.
- Students are offered a wide range of subjects and programmes within an open and well organised subject choice process.
- Students with additional educational needs are well supported and included in the school community.
- Guidance and support for students with additional educational needs are very well organised and delivered in a positive, professional and proactive manner.
- ‘The students in the school were seen to be articulate, respectful, confident and assertive. These qualities reflect the lived ethos of the school in terms of high expectations, comprehensive engagement with learning and care for the individual student.’

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

The board of management would like to outline steps taken to address the recommendation made in the WSE report and the subject inspection carried out at this time:

- A Relationships & Sexuality Education policy has been developed and was ratified by the BOM at meeting of the board on June 16th.
- Adjustments have been made to the timetable to ensure that is complies with CL 29/95. Lunch break has been reduced from 60 minutes to 55 to ensure that each student is provided with twenty eight hours of tuition each week.
- SPHE is now timetabled for all first year students in line with Circular M11/03. An additional class period has been given to Irish at first year level.
- The school has made a significant investment in ICT in the current school year. Now that the infrastructure is in place, all subject departments will be receive in-service training in the coming year to assist them in using ICT as a key tool to support teaching and learning.
• A flame resistant press is being installed in the storeroom attached to the chemistry lab this summer. The propane gas cylinder which was in use in a demonstration laboratory was removed from the building at the time of the inspection. It had only been in place for a short period of time as two of the existing science laboratories were not accessible at the time due to flood damage. It has not been used since, as these laboratories are back on line.

• The number of teachers involved in the teaching of maths has been reduced in line with this recommendation of the report.

• The number of students pursuing higher level maths at Leaving Cert level has more than doubled in the past year, in line with this recommendation of the report.

• The review of our assessment policy in all subject areas is one of our planning priorities for the coming school year.

• The Board is committed to the provision of CPD for all teaching staff in the area of teaching methodologies.