

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

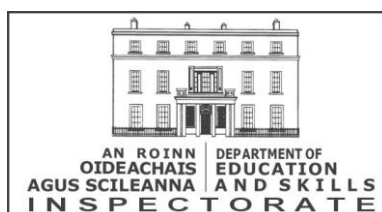
**Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning**

REPORT

**St Dominic's College,
Cabra, Dublin 7**

Roll number: 60731F

Date of inspection: 25 April 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April 2012 in St Dominic's College. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

St Dominic's College as a Dominican school, is now a member of the Le Chéile Schools Trust. Current enrolment is 875 girls. It shares a campus with the Dominican Sisters, St Mary's school for deaf girls, Casa Caterina Special School, Youthreach and St Catherine's Primary School. The school offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate (LC), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management is very committed to the ongoing development of the school and, in line with the mission statement, works to enable every student to develop her potential, both in the academic and non-academic fields.
- The senior management team adopts a collegial and collaborative approach to the running of the school and strongly promotes the empowerment of teachers to deliver a better service to students.
- Distributed leadership is evident in the work of teams of post-of-responsibility holders, whole-school planning groups, and on an individual level.
- There is a strong commitment to the care and support of students in the school.
- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good. Teacher instruction was very clear and accurate and lesson content was informed by up-to-date information and everyday examples.
- Classroom management was very good and lessons proceeded in a caring and respectful atmosphere.
- The schools' capacity for improvement is very good.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- To further progress the good work taking place in subject planning, programmes should be expressed in terms of learning outcomes.

- Policy development in the areas of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and the whole-school guidance plan should be prioritised for completion in the next school year.
- Self-evaluation within subject departments should now be extended to focus on a critical appraisal of teaching and learning in order to optimise the learning experience for students.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management, now in the second year of its tenure, is very committed to the ongoing development of the school. The board is properly constituted and shows a very good understanding of its managerial and leadership role. A very good level of contact is maintained with the trustee body – Le Chéile – which actively supports the school and provides a good level of advice and training to various school groups. There is also a high level of communication between the board and the acting principal as secretary.

In line with the mission statement, the board aims to enable every student to develop her potential, both in the academic and non-academic fields. The board leads policy development and has been engaged in an ongoing process of policy development and review. Procedures are in place to support the systematic review of all school policies. In future planning, the board should take cognisance of responses to student and parent questionnaires which indicate that there is scope to develop systems that seek the views of parents and students on school matters and inform them on the work of the school.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

The Parents' Association (PA) plays an important role in the life of the school through fundraising and the organisation of activities and is well supported by the school. All meetings are attended by a liaison teacher and the acting principal attends meetings regularly. There is cooperation between the student council and the PA and representatives of the student council have met formally with both the PA and the board. However, responses to questionnaires regarding parental awareness of the work of the board and the parents association indicate an area for development.

The school's priorities for development

The board has a strategic plan that identifies self-evaluation, the development of literacy and improving student attainment as priorities. Literacy strategies, such as the development and display of key words in classrooms have been introduced. Student attainment is being monitored through an analysis of test results and self-evaluation is being promoted through the use of evaluation templates by teachers, students and parents. These are good practices.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team comprises the acting principal, and two deputy principals; one of the deputy principal positions is also currently filled in an acting capacity. They adopt a collegial and collaborative approach to the management of the school and commendably have strongly promoted the empowerment of teachers to deliver a better service to students. Examples of initiatives in this area are the 'log-on learn', 'Green Schools' and literacy projects. Responses to parent questionnaires completed during the evaluation indicate a high level of satisfaction with the manner in which the school is run. The senior management team has completed programmes such as Misneach, Tánaiste, Tóraíocht, as well as training through the Joint Managerial Body (JMB).

Distributed leadership is evident in the school and post-of-responsibility holders are clearly identifiable as a middle management team. In addition, non-postholders are encouraged to take on responsibility and this builds expertise in the school. Year head meetings are scheduled weekly and the full team of assistant principals meets once per month. Post-holders are delegated responsibility for their assigned duties and are given scope to further develop their roles. The schedule of posts was reviewed last year. Following whole-staff discussion on the needs of the school, a revised schedule was agreed. During the next review of posts, care should be taken to ensure that all core areas are included in the schedule.

School development planning is well co-ordinated by an assistant principal who works with management and groups of teachers in identifying and progressing priorities. A very detailed and informative school plan is in place. Subject teams too have worked collaboratively and have drawn up common programmes of work and share resources. To further progress this good work, ongoing review should see programmes being expressed in terms of learning outcomes, which put the focus of planning on students' learning.

Data on student achievement in the certificate examinations were included in many of the subject plans. In some instances, graphical displays of results in comparison with national norms were provided. Best use would be made of these data through the documenting of their analysis and the development of action plans as appropriate. Good practices in subject plans include links with the primary curriculum in a small number of plans, an outline of subject goals for the current year and, in one instance, an evaluation of the achievement of these goals and a collaboratively created overview of modern-language provision.

Good structures are in place to facilitate communication within the school. These include electronic boards, text messaging, e-portal, and announcements on the intercom and at assemblies. Two school newsletters are issued annually and the school website is being developed.

There are many highly motivated and dedicated teachers in the school; some teachers provide supplementary tuition to students. Management facilitates and encourages teachers to attend continuing professional development (CPD). In addition, many teachers are involved in subject associations and the provision of in-service for teachers at local and national level. Most recent whole-school CPD has addressed differentiation and assessment for learning. Good use has also been made of internal expertise in the areas of ICT and seven teachers have been trained as ICT facilitators with the professional development service for teachers (PDST). A team of teachers involved in the Forbairt programme has developed the literacy programme which is now in operation. The team, which includes the

acting principal and one deputy principal, regularly attends active-learning network (ALN) meetings.

Leadership of students

The commitment to the care and support of students in the school is clearly in evidence. The care system is strong and care team meetings take place weekly. Students also benefit from the services of a chaplain who provides counselling and annual retreats for first year students.

Good procedures are in place to support the transition of students from feeder primary schools into first year. These include information evenings, visits to primary schools by members of the care team and fifth and sixth class student familiarisation visits to the school. Information evenings are also provided to assist students in the transition to TY and fifth year. While these interventions are acknowledged as good practice, questionnaire responses indicate that there is scope to further enhance these procedures. The guidance counsellors and chaplain play key roles at the times of transition as well as in general student care. A whole-school guidance plan that is currently in development should be prioritised for completion in the next school year.

The year heads and tutors play valuable roles in the lives of students; they meet their groups regularly, ensuring communication and affirmation. Year heads have a role in monitoring students' academic progress and they follow up on issues identified through school reports. These are good practices. Attendance and punctuality are monitored on an ongoing basis and are followed up by year heads and tutors as required.

The Code of Behaviour has been recently reviewed and, in line with good practice, input was sought from the PA and the student council. There is a structured approach to the management of students and a clear ladder of referral is in place. The PA expressed its approval for the school's strong code of behaviour and responses to questionnaires indicate that most parents believe discipline is good in the school. During the course of the evaluation, inspectors noted that students were polite and the behaviour of students on the corridors, between classes, was exemplary.

SPHE is co-ordinated by a post holder and the school makes appropriate provision for SPHE and RSE. Policies regarding both these areas are currently in draft form and should be progressed to ratification, in collaboration with the PA and student council, in the next school year.

The school offers a very good range of curricular programmes and subjects and strives to address the needs of all students. Commendably, all students study a continental European language as a matter of policy. In addition, concurrent timetabling is used to facilitate students studying core subjects at the appropriate level. There is good uptake of the optional TY programme with approximately seventy per cent of students choosing it; the programme provides opportunities to students to participate in a range of subjects and develop new skills. Uptake of the LCVP is very good. The LCA programme provides a good range of subjects through electives and specialisms. In preparing next year's timetable, care should be taken to ensure LCA year-two students are receiving the required twenty-eight hours tuition time.

The school has an Admissions and Enrolment policy in place. Responses to parent questionnaires indicate that the enrolment procedures are clear. Prior to entry to St Dominic's College, students sit a standardised assessment, the results of which see them placed in one of three bands. While it is acknowledged that the school makes good efforts to meet the needs of students in each of these bands, consideration should be given to

moving to a more mixed-ability setting so as to allow every student further opportunities to develop to her full potential in line with the school's mission statement.

The two qualified learning support teachers form a core team in this area. There is a high level of collaboration between this core team, school management, and teachers regarding the organisation of learning support in the school. Planning to support students with additional learning needs is of a high quality, however, more time may need to be made available to facilitate the drawing up of individual learning plans where required. It is commendable that information on strategies, methodologies and resources is discussed with subject teachers and is available for reference.

Student leadership is cultivated through the operation of the student council and prefect system and through participation in social justice initiatives. Other supports for students include the 'Baby Think it Over' programme, supervised evening study, the mentoring programme, Gaisce and peer coaching.

Many teachers devote much time and energy to ensuring that students' learning extends beyond lessons. The dedication of staff to the provision of a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is most praiseworthy. It is good to note that students' achievement is acknowledged and celebrated by the school community. Examples include the awards evening, information on the school website and displays in key areas of the school.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school has very good facilities and the school infrastructure is of a high standard. Student achievements are displayed in the foyer and the administration staff is welcoming and helpful. Specialist rooms are well resourced and all classrooms contain either a PC and data projector or interactive whiteboard. The school also has a library and benefits from the services of a part-time librarian. All areas of the school are very well maintained and the ancillary staff contribute effectively to this.

Environmental awareness is well addressed; the school has a Green Schools committee and at the time of the evaluation achieved a Green Flag for recycling. The school Health and Safety policy has been recently reviewed.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

During the evaluation, thirty lessons were observed over a range of subject areas. The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good.

In many lessons, the good practice of sharing the intended learning outcomes with the students at the outset and reinforcing them during and at the end of the lesson was observed. This strategy should be extended to all lessons.

Teacher instruction was very clear and accurate. Key concepts were emphasised and where relevant, lesson content was informed by up-to-date information and everyday examples. In all lessons visited, classroom management was very good. Teachers created a positive and supportive learning environment. Teaching and learning proceeded in a caring and respectful atmosphere.

Teaching and learning were most effective where the content of the lesson was varied and where well-planned and appropriately-used resources allowed for differentiation to meet students' needs and abilities. One example is the use of cards containing formulae to assist with calculations. Many of the methodologies observed stimulated and motivated students and encouraged them to actively engage with the lesson content. There was scope to engage the students more fully through classroom activities in a minority of lessons.

It was good to note that some teachers included appropriate elements of student choice in their lessons and student creativity was encouraged. Examples include the input from students to the content of revision classes, the use of role plays and peer tutoring. This is a good means of encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.

ICT was used in the majority of lessons. Best practices were observed where appropriately chosen visual images, animations, diagrams and video clips were used to clarify complex concepts. However, teachers should be mindful of the over-reliance on digital presentations as a 'text book' where students remain passive in their learning.

In many lessons, students were organised to work in small groups. This strategy was seen to be instrumental in providing variety and creating enthusiasm among students. In all lessons, understanding and learning were checked using a variety of questioning strategies. Some good use was made of higher-order questioning to encourage students to analyse, apply and critically appraise lesson content. These strategies should be employed by all teachers to ensure students of all abilities are challenged to meet their potential.

A good level of monitoring of students' written work was observed. Best practice was seen where teachers gave directional and formative feedback to students. This approach should be more widespread. Homework is regularly assigned and teachers have adopted good strategies for checking homework. Another effective *Assessment for Learning* strategy observed was the use of show-me boards or mini whiteboards.

Most teachers are classroom based and the physical environment of classrooms visited was very impressive. The literacy strategy of displaying key words was very evident in the classrooms.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The school has made very good progress in implementing recommendations from previous subject inspection reports. Examples include the rescheduling of Home Economics classes, the concurrent timetabling of mathematics groups to allow students to access all levels and the inclusion of Applied Mathematics on the TY programme. The recommendations made regarding mixed-ability teaching in English and Mathematics should now be considered as part of a general move to a more mixed-ability setting in the school.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Very good progress has also been made by subject departments in implementing recommendations made in relation to teaching and learning. This is evidence of teachers' commitment to ongoing school improvement.

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

The capacity for school improvement, under the guidance of the board and the senior management team, is very good. The senior management team has already initiated and led the process of self-evaluation through the provision of templates for teacher and student self-review. It is commendable that some teachers have begun to use these templates. Self-evaluation within subject teams should now focus on a critical appraisal of teaching and learning in order to optimise the learning experience for students. At a whole-school level, some of the responses in parent and student questionnaires should be used as triggers for discussion and further action.

Commendably, the school has begun to use the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) for assessment in order to track students' attainment and provide baseline data for literacy development. This will prove useful in realising the school's development plan for literacy and numeracy.

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 St. Dominic's College, Cabra acknowledges the WSE/MLL report which was received on 26th September 2012.

The Board thanks the Inspection Team of the Department of Education and Skills for the professional manner in which the inspection was carried out. It was an affirming experience which validated the commitment of the Board of Management, Staff, Students and Parents to making the school a very caring and effective learning environment. We are delighted that our dedication to our Mission Statement was recognised and commended by the inspection team. (p2)

References to the following were particularly welcome:

Management and Leadership:

- The very good level of contact with the trust body – Le Chéile (p3)
- The commitment of the Board to the ongoing development of the school to leading policy development. (p3)
- The collegial and collaborative approach to the running of the school adopted by the senior management team and the empowerment of teachers. (p3,4)
- The evidence of Distributed Leadership within the middle management structures.(p4)

Quality of Teaching and Learning

- The highly motivated and dedicated teachers. (p4)
- Subject teams working collaboratively to draw up common programmes of work and share resources.(p4)
- The well co-ordinated School Development Planning.(p4)
- The high level of collaboration in the organisation of learning support.(p5)
- The use of ICT in lessons.(p7)

Student Support

- The strong commitment to care and support of the students.(p4)
- The good procedures that are in place to facilitate transition from primary school.(p5)
- The valuable role played by the Year Heads and Tutors in the lives of students. (p5)
- The time and energy many teachers devote to the provision of a wide range of co- curricular and extra-curricular activities.(p6)
- The promotion of student leadership through the operation of the Student Council and the prefect system. (p6)
- The very active Parents' Association (p3)

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

- Policy development is on-going – the Guidance Plan and SPHE Policy are ready for ratification by the Board. The RSE and IT Policies will be reviewed by the end of the year. (p2)
- Arrangements are being made for increased formal communication between the Board of Management and the Parents' Association. (p2)
- Implementation of recommendations with regard to expressed learning outcomes and further developing a culture of self evaluation is in train (p3)