An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Jesus and Mary College,
Goatstown Road, Dublin 14.
Roll number: 60891E

Date of inspection: 23 October 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Jesus and Mary College was undertaken in October, 2009. 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, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), Mathematics and History, and in the Transition Year (TY) programme, was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects and programme (See section 7 for details). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, Jesus and Mary College, up until recently known in the locality as Our Lady’s Grove Secondary School, was established alongside Garrán Mhuire Primary School in the extensive grounds of the Jesus and Mary congregation at Goatstown Road. The school has a Catholic ethos in keeping with the educational philosophy of St Claudine Thevenet, founder of the Jesus and Mary order, and is committed to an education which fosters personal growth, self-worth and an openness to the spiritual dimension of life for all its members. In 1967, the secondary school entered the free education scheme at the request of parents. The order of Jesus and Mary is one of the congregations which form the Le Chéile trust and share a common purpose in education.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The philosophy of St Claudine and founding principle of the school is that each student matters, is welcomed and is cared for as in a family. Jesus and Mary College values the worth of each student, it welcomes and is sensitive to each one, especially those with special educational needs, and is inclusive of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. As is articulated in the school’s mission statement, “The philosophy of Jesus and Mary schools is to foster an integrated education where each individual is valued and respected.” The caring atmosphere experienced both in and outside the classroom is in line with the stated mission and ethos of the school and was reflected in practices observed and through policies developed. The high quality teaching together with the well-structured pastoral care system and the prefect system contribute to ensuring an atmosphere of care, shared goals, purposeful learning and good relationships. The interviews with student groups bore this out and students acknowledged and appreciated the support of their teachers.

Since the transfer of school governance to Le Chéile, members of the Jesus and Mary community continue to bring the perspective of the congregation to the work of the school and the board of management, providing invaluable continuity and insightful advice, as well as contributing to students’ faith development and religious education programme. This is commendable.

In its mission statement, the school aspires to working together with students and parents in a respectful, caring and family spirit and it was praiseworthy to observe the extent to which school management and staff consistently implements measures to ensure that students are being supported to achieve their maximum potential within subjects and programmes. An impressive quality of student is being formed by the educational provision in Jesus and
Mary College. The students present as confident, friendly and supportive of each other. Teaching staff is highly committed to working with the students in the delivery of the curriculum and in some cases, to the provision of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management of Jesus and Mary College is properly constituted with representation from the trustees, teachers and parents. The board meets approximately five times a year and more frequently, if required. Both in terms of its composition and the implementation of its role, the board fulfils the requirements of the Education Act, 1998 well. Board members have availed of training from their representative bodies and they bring a complementary range of skills to their work, including financial and business expertise, as well as expertise in education and educational management. With regard to infrastructural planning, architectural expertise is also available. The contribution of long-standing members of the Jesus and Mary community provides the perspective of the congregation.

The chairperson highlighted the board’s commitment to its role since the school’s transfer to the Le Chéile trust in ensuring that the wishes and ethos of the congregation continue to be carried out and in ensuring the quality of the education that is provided. The board availed of the opportunity in the context of the school’s recent review of the code of behaviour to revisit the school’s stated ethos. This is very good practice. The board views its own role as an executive one and the board is to be praised for the awareness and understanding demonstrated of its responsibilities. The board acknowledged its decision-making authority and, whilst delegating the day-to-day running of the school to senior management, knows that the ultimate responsibility for matters of governance lies with the board.

The focus of the board’s deliberations is appropriately student-centred. It was noteworthy that the first question articulated by the board regarded student involvement in the evaluation. The desire of both senior management and the board of management to sustain a good level of student attainment is being achieved through careful attention and monitoring. The board conducts an analysis of student attainment in certificate examinations on an annual basis. This is very good practice. Care and attention has been given to enhancing the quality of teaching and of teaching resources. The development of the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure within the school, including the installation of interactive whiteboards in base classrooms, has ensured the increased integration of technology into teaching and learning.

The board has facilitated significant engagement with the support services on the part of teachers. The benefit of regular engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) in implementing subjects and programmes was clearly in evidence in lessons observed. Training in the use of ICT has also been a feature of the in-service provided and further training will be required to meet ongoing needs of teachers. Interventions have also been put in place to support teachers and team-teaching has been employed in some instances to support effective classroom management. Team-teaching has also been deployed for the provision of numeracy and literacy support within the mainstream classroom. These are good practices.

Enhancing the profile of the school and projecting the school image through promotion and through marketing is an identified priority for the board. Jesus and Mary College has experienced a continuous decrease in enrolment over recent years, from four hundred and thirty-three in 2004 to three hundred and sixty-seven in 2009. This trend needs to be addressed. Garrán Mhuire, the main feeder primary school for Jesus and Mary College, has
been co-educational since 2003. This may account for some of the decrease in enrolment. The recent demographic trends in the area, as well as the school’s lack of sporting and other facilities, were also cited by the board as possible factors. It is recommended that the board initiate a process of strategic planning to address the challenge of sustaining and increasing enrolment and to identify what is critical to the school’s success and growth.

Considerable infrastructural improvements to the school building have been undertaken over the past number of years. A planning application for development and extension to the school building had been submitted, originally in 1998 and resubmitted in 2005, to the Department of Education and Skills. Support for improvements to the existing school building has been accessed through Department schemes. Most recently the board had sanctioned an application for emergency funds for repair of the roof and the installation of a lift for students. Both of these matters have received grants from the Department and have been completed. It is recommended that the board should continue to apply through the Department’s Summer Works Scheme for incremental improvements to the school building. In light of the decrease in enrolment, the board is aware of the uncertainty regarding the need for the provision of additional accommodation.

From examination of school documentation, including minutes of staff meetings, of the annual general meetings of the school’s parents’ council and of board and subject meetings, there was clear evidence that some infrastructural matters remain unresolved. Questions, such as fundraising for an astro-turf hockey pitch, for refurbishment of the basketball court and for the entrance shared with the primary school and the congregation, reappear for discussion and resolution from year to year. The adjacent primary school has been granted permission for a new building, which will be situated quite close to the secondary school. This building work is to commence soon and may impact negatively on access to the secondary school, the entrance to which already requires enhancement. In this context, the overarching co-operation of the trustees in planning for the school’s infrastructural and educational developments into the future is crucial. While the complexity of ownership and parallel development of the school site is acknowledged, the question of the overall development of the campus and the school grounds is one which needs to be addressed by the board with the trustees.

The board has been thorough in reviewing and ratifying school policies and has all the policies in line with statutory requirements and Department circulars in place. The process of policy development and review as outlined is consultative. The consultative approach taken to developing, ratifying, implementing and reviewing school policies involves representatives from all relevant partners and is in keeping with best practice. However, the board should ensure that, as a matter of course, the date of policy ratification is clearly recorded or stamped on the actual policy document. For example, while 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), the date of formal adoption was unclear from the documentation examined.

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 new staff); and that management has ensured that staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. It was clear from board minutes that one of the teacher representatives on the board had attended training in the implementation of the Child Protection Guidelines. However, the details of the training and subsequent sharing and dissemination should also be recorded. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.
1.3 In-school management

Jesus and Mary College is an effective school in many aspects of its provision. The core work of the school, the quality of teaching and learning, is good. The principal has a clear vision, promoting academic achievement and improvement into the future. The senior management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, works closely together and has a visible presence as a management team. The principal and deputy principal fulfil different aspects of the role and bring a complementary range of skills and strengths to the management of the school. There is regular contact between them regarding the overall running of the school and their relationship is based on mutual respect and on regular and open communication. They meet every morning before the day begins and throughout the day. The dedication of senior management to achieving the school’s aims was clear and their vision for the future guides and informs their work at every level.

The principal is the administrator and liaises with the Department of Education and Skills on all matters. The principal also liaises with external school services and agencies and with parents. The principal has introduced many positive initiatives into the school. For example, the principal now meets with each incoming student and her parents on an individual basis prior to entry to the school. The approach of the principal is characterised by clarity of direction and issues arising in the day-to-day and week-to-week running of the school are addressed with decisiveness and firmness. The deputy principal is pivotal in guiding and caring for individual students in the spirit of the school’s ethos, helping to equip them with skills for study and for life. The deputy principal also plays a key role in the school’s discipline system. Only in exceptional circumstances does a discipline matter come to the principal.

The recent review of the school’s code of behaviour highlights the focus of senior management and staff on reinforcement of positive student behaviour and affirmation of students’ achievements, demonstrating a shift in emphasis from a sanction to a reward and merit system. A clear code of behaviour has been established which includes a well structured ladder of referral from subject teacher to class tutor to year head to deputy principal. The code of behaviour is very transparent: students know what is expected of them and students demonstrate a sense of responsibility for their own behaviour and work ethic. The behaviour of students was observed to be exemplary at the time of the evaluation.

Senior management and the year heads are diligent in relation to monitoring punctuality, attendance and retention of students. The electronic swipe card system introduced this year to monitor student attendance and punctuality and the increased use of the text message system for immediate communication with parents are effective mechanisms which support the implementation of the attendance policy.

The delegation of areas of responsibility through the post system has contributed to the development of key organisational structures within the school: a year-head structure is firmly established; ICT co-ordination has been introduced as a post, crucial to current developments in teaching and learning; a special educational needs co-ordinator has been appointed; and public relations, identified by the board as a priority, has been assigned as a post. Other examples of duties assigned include programme co-ordination, school development planning, teacher induction, students’ council liaison and health and safety. While a formal review of posts has not been conducted by senior management, changes, such as those mentioned above, to the schedule of posts have been achieved incrementally. Senior management is satisfied that the current range of posts is meeting the needs of the school.
Senior management meets regularly with senior cycle and with junior cycle year heads. Periodic one-to-one meetings are held with post holders. The timing and the frequency of those meetings is dependent on the area of responsibility assigned. Regular meetings between senior management and teachers are also held in relation to student welfare and pastoral care, guidance, Transition Year (TY) and subject areas. Post holders, whether assistant principals (APs) or special duties teachers (SDTs), do not meet as a group. Senior management should explore the possibility of introducing such meetings at intervals throughout the year to facilitate consultation with post holders and to the development of leadership and management roles within the school. The Le Chéile trust has made the commitment to its schools to provide for systematic ongoing development of school staff, especially in the area of leadership. Senior management and staff with leadership roles within the school are encouraged to engage in such development opportunities.

Senior management plays an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of the many aspects of the curriculum in the school. Information regarding school matters is disseminated to staff involved in teaching subjects and programmes in many ways. Staff is consulted widely on relevant issues, and in relation to ongoing school review and evaluation. Minutes of meetings provide evidence of the extent of whole-staff consultation; however, it was not possible to access the views of most staff in the course of the evaluation. The occasions of staff meetings are availed of by senior management to affirm and compliment staff was and this was reported to have a motivating effect. Staff meetings are also useful occasions to alert senior management to issues or possible problems. Senior management is forward looking in facilitation of CPD of personnel.

Communication systems are being developed for effective and meaningful communication with parents and the wider school community. School management has initiated the process of updating the school website which will facilitate and improve communication. Both the board and senior management see the development of the school website and technology as a key strategy in attracting students. In this context, the creation of an active and interactive school intranet system was discussed at the time of the evaluation. This would be an invaluable and cost-effective resource for both students and teachers. Currently, school events, activities, and student successes are highlighted in articles published in the school newsletter, which could readily be disseminated through the refurbished school website. It is intended that the school’s parents’ council will have its own page on the website which will facilitate dissemination of all information to the parent body. Senior management, together with staff, should continue to sustain efforts to manage and to improve processes of communication by exploiting the use of technology, thereby fostering existing links and creating new links with the community.

The parents’ council has currently a two-fold function, that of supporting parents and of fundraising and the council is encouraged to strengthen its links with the school’s alumni to support senior management and the board in attracting and promoting school enrolment. Currently, the principal and deputy principal attend all meetings of the parents’ council and the principal provides an overview at its annual general meeting (AGM) on plans for the immediate future and on achievements of the past year. All members of the school community are included in policy development and questionnaires are used to canvas the views of the general parent body. This is very good practice. While parents’ representatives on the board of management do not report back to the parents’ council directly, an agreed written report is furnished to parents on the main decisions of the board after each board meeting. At regular intervals throughout the year, the principal communicates formally with parents through the parents’ letter, ensuring a systematic flow of information.

The students’ council functions as an active representative body, is well supported by school staff and is proactive in contributing to the life of the school. The school also has a
prefect system, including the appointment of a head girl and deputy-head girl. The role of the prefect is to accept responsibility for assisting a particular class group and to liaise with the respective class tutor. In this way, prefects contribute to the effective and smooth running of the school. The prefects work closely with the student council representatives from each class group. Student representatives articulated the view that they were listened to and respected as members of the student council. In discussion with inspectors, students used the words ‘comfortable’, ‘togetherness’, ‘respectful’ and ‘respected’ when talking about relationships within the school.

Student achievement is affirmed and celebrated by the school community during graduation ceremonies. The school, after consultation with subject teachers, presents an academic excellence award to one student from each class group and an overall student-of-the-year award. Parents praised the effectiveness of the assessment protocols in place.

One of the central duties of the board and of senior management is the implementation of the school’s admissions policy and the board is aware of the importance attached to reviewing such a policy. A curricular decision to make TY compulsory for all students from 2011 is clearly indicated in the school’s admissions policy, as this change will entail the commitment to the completion of a six-year cycle on the part of all students. This indication is good practice. The policy should also alert parents to their right to appeal a refusal to enrol under Section 29 of Education Act, 1998. Some other small amendments to the school’s admissions policy were discussed and agreed with senior management at the time of the evaluation.

Reference is also made in the school’s admission policy to the financial contributions from parents, which supplement the resources received from the Department and allow the school to upgrade facilities for the students and to broaden subject choice. Parents are informed about the parental contribution when they come to the school for the initial interview with senior management. In the school’s regular letters to parents, the principal specifies very clearly what the contribution has funded. However, the voluntary nature of the parental contribution is not clear in the policy and this should be rectified.

1.4 Management of resources

The principal takes responsibility for the organisation of the timetable and optimal deployment of staff underpins decisions on timetabling. Current arrangements ensure that all students have access to more than twenty-eight hours instruction time. The school in fact provides twenty-eight hours and forty minutes of tuition to most of its students. The pastoral care period on the timetable, therefore, is over and above the minimum requirement of tuition time. The use of available resources is maximised to offer as broad a curriculum as possible and this is highly commended. The timetable is designed on the principle that all teachers are assigned twenty-two class contact hours, with those teachers with assistant principal posts teaching up to twenty-one hours, where possible and taking timetabling demands into account.

The organisation of the school day and class periods ensures concentrated time for the delivery of curriculum content. However, it leaves very little time and space for student out-of-class activities. It is recommended that the structure of the school day and week be reviewed from a student-centred perspective, to consider, for example, a longer lunch break which could support extra-curricular activity or simply more social interaction between students.

The targeted investment in the maintenance and improvement of the existing school building undertaken over the last number of years has resulted in visible improvements to teachers’ working environment and students’ learning environment. The additional finances
recouped through parental contributions are made available to support the acquisition of resources, such as the purchase of the interactive whiteboards. The school building is attractive, well maintained and impeccably clean. The systematic approach by class teachers and cleaning staff ensure this from day to day. The role of staff and students in taking responsibility for their environment is acknowledged.

Information is disseminated to students and staff through dedicated subject or activity notice boards distributed throughout the school building. The school’s reception area has appropriate displays of trophies representing sporting and cultural achievements and photographs to celebrate achievement and excellence in all spheres of school life. Corridors were also being used to display student art work and projects at the time of the evaluation which provided for an attractive visual display as well as affirmation of the quality of student work. The expansion of print-rich environments in classrooms and corridors and the increased use of displays and notice boards are recommended.

In supporting the work of the senior management team, the school’s office administrator, reception administrator and caretaker are responsible for seeing what needs to be done in terms of administration in relation to students, staffing needs, maintenance, finance, the processing of Department returns and claims and other additional duties. The maintenance of the school building and the attention to health and safety throughout is very thorough and is commended. Effective and efficient administration and maintenance systems is the result of the hard work of all involved in administration.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The school’s engagement with the school development planning process spans many years and school documentation examined provides evidence of the quality of both the process and the product. Initial involvement in school planning through the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) inspired work completed on the school plan. Between 1998 and 2000, an advisory committee was put in place to revise the code of discipline, to advice on staff development, on the establishment of the students’ council and to review the pastoral care system. The outcomes of the work completed are visible today. A comprehensive review of school policies was conducted in the school year 2006/07. In the course of this review, existing policies were renewed and updated, where necessary, and policies for development were identified.

More recently, all relevant policies to support students have been developed including substance use, countering bullying, dealing with critical incidents and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Recent policies developed such as the special needs policy and the guidance policy are now ready to be brought before the board of management for ratification. For aspects of school organisation which do not require a policy, a statement of the school’s practice is documented. This is a praiseworthy innovation which clarifies the procedures or steps involved in organisational matters which are required from year to year. In relation to the school examinations policy, the school should consider inserting a reference to practical or coursework elements of some Leaving Certificate subjects, such as History or Geography, and the arrangements to be followed for completion of the work storage and security. Based on the evidence gathered during the evaluation, it is clear that a consultative approach has been taken to developing, ratifying, implementing and reviewing school policies.

In order to support the school development planning process, the principal has initiated a programme for change with three main objectives: to raise academic achievement; to
develop the school’s website to promote the school and attract increasing enrolment; and to refocus the work of the parents’ council to have a more proactive role in educational matters. These are worthy developmental priorities for the school in the immediate term and they reflect the current context.

A small voluntary steering group has been created to support school development planning. This is good practice. The role of co-ordination of school development planning has been assigned as an interim measure to senior management until a post becomes available. The situation as it pertains at present necessitates senior management taking a proactive role in planning matters to lead progress in the school’s pressing priorities for development. This is an onerous responsibility on top of senior management duties and ought to be reviewed. For this reason, the assigning of a post for the co-ordination of school development planning should be prioritised as part of any future review of posts, as should the pursuance by some members of staff of a qualification in this area. Senior management should also consider broadening the base of the steering group to facilitate the inclusion of all teachers in the school’s development and improvement.

A whole-school review and analysis of current needs of the school with a view to informing future planning and the next set of developmental priorities should be undertaken. Such a review could form the basis for a strategic five-year plan of consolidation, improvement and development. This process should involve all partners in the school community, trustees, parents, students, past students, and most importantly staff, under the direction of senior management and the board of management.

The centrality of the student in school management’s decision-making processes was apparent throughout the evaluation. Appropriately, the quality of teaching and learning is at the centre of teachers’ planning activity. Subject planning is progressing well and planning folders are available for all subject areas. Examples of subject plans examined during the evaluation contained all the required elements of good planning and some subject plans provide exemplars of best practice, whereby learning objectives, methodologies and resources are outlined in an integrated way. The accompanying subject folders examined contained documents which outline procedural matters to do with subject organisation, class formation, assessment and homework, as well as list of textbooks, materials and available resources.

Records of subject planning meetings reveal issues and concerns of individual subject departments, some of which relate to the position of the subject on the curriculum, student access to the subject and the need to upgrade facilities which impact on effective delivery of the subject. The reiteration of such curricular matters indicates the need for curriculum review to be a regular feature of planning. It is therefore recommended that, similar to practice in many schools, a curriculum advisory group be established to review how the school presents the curriculum and to explore the principles which underpin the decisions in relation to the curriculum.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

There are many strands to the curriculum offered in Jesus and Mary College and the range of subjects is commendable. Parent representatives, interviewed in the course of the evaluation, expressed their satisfaction with the curriculum on offer and indicated that parents choose the school because of good subject range. On entry to the school, first-year students study a number of core subjects and choose four subjects from a range of optional subjects. In addition to English, Irish and Mathematics, the study of a modern European
language and the study of Music are mandatory to Junior Certificate. Music is one of the central strands of the curriculum and this was also favoured by parents. Currently, Science is optional at junior cycle. Given the availability of three science subjects at senior cycle, the possibility of having Science as one of the core subjects studied by all students at junior cycle should be explored as part of long-term curricular planning.

Mixed ability is the principle on which class formation is based at junior cycle. This is commendable. Arrangements on the timetable also facilitate concurrency in Irish, English, Mathematics and French and senior management strives to maintain this position. Such timetabling arrangements are in place to facilitate setting in Mathematics and Irish at different levels at the end of first year. English is taught in a mixed-ability setting in junior cycle and TY, and classes are designated higher and ordinary in fifth and sixth year, according to the course being followed for the certificate examinations. The good practice of deploying teachers in both cycles, as is the case in most subject disciplines, should be extended, wherever possible, as it promotes a view of the subject as a continuous building of knowledge and skills from first year to sixth year and therefore also promotes good planning.

The sample of subjects inspected as part of the whole-school evaluation serves to illustrate some very good aspects of provision for subjects on the school timetable. The allocation of time to subjects is generally satisfactory and the distribution of lesson periods across the week allows for regular contact with subjects, which facilitates optimum benefit for students. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is appropriately provided as a core subject on the curriculum for all junior cycle students. RSE is delivered as part of the SPHE programme for all students, with the exception of sixth-year students who are provided with dedicated time for RSE as part of their Religious Education (RE) programme. The timetabling of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) is commended. In addition, all students are provided with one dedicated period per week for pastoral care. This is praiseworthy.

Examination of the timetable also illustrates some anomalies in the way subjects are offered or in the time allocation to individual subjects. There are double periods provided for physical education in junior cycle for some class groups and this should be extended to all class groups, where at all possible. The allocation of single periods is not ideal for effective delivery of the physical education curriculum, where aspects such as theory, skills demonstration, practice and development need to be integrated into lessons. The allocation of one period per week in TY to History is insufficient to ensure retention of knowledge and skills in the subject acquired during junior cycle. This may impact negatively on uptake of History at Leaving Certificate level and should therefore be addressed.

The decision to provide Religious Education (RE) as an examination subject in senior cycle was taken by school management in order to offer students the possibility of an eighth subject, as most students currently study seven subjects for Leaving Certificate. The timetabling of RE as an examination subject facilitates the creation of an additional lesson period for those students studying higher level Mathematics and a period for senior Choir. For some small number of senior cycle students, this has resulted in a timetabled study period in fifth and sixth year which reduces the amount of tuition time available to them and should therefore be reviewed. The possibility of the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) should be explored by school management. The Link Modules lessons could be timetabled concurrently with RE, Mathematics and Choir and may provide the possibility of an additional eighth subject, as well as adding a vocational dimension to student choice.

Senior management is constantly looking at innovative ways of broadening the curricular options for students at both junior and senior cycle. In order to provide the breadth of
subject options desired in senior cycle, school management is concentrating on the provision of as many subject options as possible to students, even in the context of small numbers opting for a particular subject. Optimising the use of the available teaching allocation in this way has resulted in larger class-group numbers in junior cycle, which inspectors noted.

Reviews of the curriculum conducted have resulted in the introduction of new subjects and a broader range of modular courses in TY. To optimise the most effective deployment of teachers to subjects, levels and year groups, the conduct of an audit of the skills, expertise, strengths and interests of teachers is recommended. Such an audit would provide senior management with up-to-date information on what additional qualifications, skills and interests staff members may have.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Students are ably supported in their decision-making in relation to subjects and choices at key stages in their education. Prior to entry to the school, as mentioned earlier, the principal meets with students and parents. On the occasion of this meeting, the subject options for first year are explained. Incoming first-year students select their options in January at the same time as the assessment tests are administered. Currently, students must choose two subjects from Art, Science, Home Economics and Business Studies. At senior cycle, option bands are created following an open choice of all subjects and adapted in order to optimally meet the needs of the full student cohort. The school operates a system, whereby there is some flexibility in relation to students opting to change their choice after a week or two in fifth year.

Jesus and Mary College introduced TY to its programme provision in 1994. Participation in TY is currently optional with two class groups following the programme. TY will be compulsory for the school year 2010/2011. A comprehensive TY programme is offered to students, with core subjects, sampling of subjects, alternative modules and a calendar of events and activities. The TY vision statement of enabling students to reach their full potential both academically and socially and of fostering the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of life is lived out through many aspects of the programme and the programme offers students opportunities for self-directed learning and broader skills development. Preparation for the world of work and mini company are very suitable modules offered during TY. The TY co-ordinator undertakes a range of organisational and curricular duties in relation to the programme which are fulfilled efficiently and effectively. Much of the programme co-ordinator’s time has been taken up with review and development of the programme, particularly in the context of the proposed extension of the programme to accommodate all students.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

A number of co-curricular and extra-curricular initiatives and activities that support and enhance learning are provided. The efforts of those involved in organising these events are highly commendable, as they not only make a significant positive contribution to the atmosphere in the school but also support and consolidate students’ learning and well-being. The extra-curricular provision includes sports, such as hockey, tennis, fencing and cross-country training. Among the co-curricular activities offered are debating, public speaking, poetry reading, and involvement in competitions, such as the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, Gaisce and Young Social Innovators (YSI). Inspectors availed of the opportunities during the course of the evaluation to observe students participating in an inter-school hockey match and also in an inter-school debating competition organised by Concern.
The broad range of activities associated with Music involves participation by a number of students at both junior and senior cycle in choir rehearsals at lunchtime and after school and in musicals. A number of events that promote health and well-being such as an anti-bullying week and a healthy-eating week take place during the year as part of the focused weeks to promote SPHE within the school. The use of an environmental awareness week, with a focus on recycling and energy conservation, provides a means of enhancing the already demonstrated student appreciation of school environment and simultaneously should help to enhance the school campus. The school’s commitment to the holistic development of the student should be enhanced by the incremental expansion of the extra-curricular provision.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Collaborative planning is well advanced across a range of programmes and subjects. It has been noted that subject or programme planning meetings may occur once a term among teachers, a little less often in some contexts, and on a weekly basis between some programme co-ordinators and school management. This is a very important support to subject and programme development at the school. A focus on a core-team approach is recommended in future TY planning. In all cases, either a programme co-ordinator or volunteer subject co-ordinator was in place and had clearly defined duties. Minutes of departmental meetings or records of meetings with the principal where relevant, are also maintained and show a good emphasis on practical and developmental matters overall.

In the documentation which was reviewed, a good degree of termly and yearly planning is evident. When developing such plans, more emphasis on syllabus requirements and learning outcomes and less on textbook layout is recommended in some cases. Planning should also ensure that no gaps in learning occur as students change from one level to another during preparation for certificate examinations. In relation to TY planning, some subject-specific elements of plans ought to steer a little further away from Leaving Certificate material. Plans in some departments to use a school intranet facility to share materials and resources are commended. This is recommended for wider application, if possible. Very good progress has been made in terms of ICT provision within classrooms. A focus on the sharing of ideas on the use of ICT to enhance teaching and learning should be included in future subject or programme planning.

Subject and programme planning is a reflective and active process in Jesus and Mary College. In different contexts, it has incorporated curriculum planning, subject promotion, awards, planning for students with additional educational needs and from culturally diverse backgrounds, and advance preparation for the introduction of new syllabuses. The proposed move to a compulsory TY will require consideration at subject and programme planning levels in the near future, and the possible deployment of some transition units within this programme is also recommended. Commendable use has been made by teachers and co-ordinators of a range of in-service courses, including contact with subject associations, where relevant.

Considerable collaborative support has also occurred in relation to activities outside the classroom, including trips and competitions, the hosting of visiting speakers and agencies, and the development of community links. A deliberate emphasis in planning activity on student matters like confidence-building and experience of real-life situations, including in the world of work, is very commendable. So too is the degree to which individual lesson preparation was provided across the range of subjects and programmes evaluated.
4.2 Teaching and Learning

In all lessons observed, a very pleasant and respectful classroom atmosphere obtained, with very good teacher-student rapport evident at all times. Occasionally classroom space was restrictive, or might have had more visually rich environments. Most teachers have their own base rooms and many rooms had very supportive displays of students’ work, posters and other stimulating materials. Students were impeccably behaved in all classes. Teachers were generally very clear in outlining lesson aims and in encouraging students’ participation through early strategies like homework review, questioning and through general interaction. In the case of more reticent students, it is suggested that an emphasis on more active learning methods and small-group tasks earlier on in the lesson could help to enhance their communication skills.

Lesson development varied significantly depending on the subject observed. Teachers had clearly done substantial preparatory work, with a wide range of visual, text handouts and objects prepared for use during most lessons. This variety provided a number of opportunities for differentiated teaching. Such materials were also successfully employed as trigger points in lessons, while occasional use of textbook reading was also satisfactory. In a number of instances, a very impressive focus on anecdotal and student-relevant issues was successful in promoting student engagement and learning.

Where an interactive and discursive approach was sought, an emphasis on small-group work was generally evident and is recommended for wider use. In many lessons, students were well used to such activity and issues like the moving of desks or distribution of worksheets were handled seamlessly by teachers and students alike. Commendably, teachers adopted a facilitative role rather than a directive one and maintained a good focus on students’ learning through interaction. When such activities were ongoing, many teachers circulated around the room and discussed progress briefly with different groups.

Effective whole-class teaching methods were used, which included substantial use of the ICT equipment. Interactive whiteboard technology was deployed to present a range of textual and visual stimuli. This in turn helped to generate interest and became focal points for questioning, student tasks and, in some instances, for very high quality analytical work. It was commendable that, in lessons where ICT was used, the focus was always on using it to facilitate rather than dominate learning activity. The use of interactive technology deserves to be explored to its fullest, drawing on the expertise of all teachers in ICT.

The use of oral questioning throughout lessons and of student presentations following group activity was very effective in not only gauging students’ learning but also in developing self-confidence. In some instances, teachers made very good use of the classroom board to write up and draw together the feedback and learning from such questioning or at the end of such activities. This is commended and is recommended for wider use, where relevant. Further supports to student learning, observed in almost all lessons, included a return to the learning outcomes which had been presented initially, reinforcement of core issues discussed, the assigning of short note-making tasks and of homework for students to reflect and build on the lesson content and issues identified. Overall, such strategies were very effective in ensuring high-quality learning opportunities for all students. Students’ attainment in certificate examinations reflects a good uptake of higher level in both Junior and Leaving Certificate and good to very good attainment at both higher and ordinary levels.

4.3 Assessment

As outlined earlier in terms of classroom practice, very good levels of questioning, group feedback and homework assignment have been identified as informal assessment supports
in Jesus and Mary College. Assessment at subject and programme levels has incorporated strategies to promote learning. Teachers are commended for their sensitivity in ensuring student progress and affirming student learning. The monitoring of student activity also includes an assessment of students’ development and engagement. In some subject areas, very good use of both formative and summative assessment of homework is commended. In specific areas, a department-generated ‘assessment tool-kit’ and visual tasks linked to assessing content knowledge and skills are commended. The move to portfolio assessment across TY is also very supportive of both the assessment and promotion of students’ learning, engagement, self-confidence and communication skills.

At whole-school level, the commitment to developing assessment and homework policies is evident and, more importantly, is reflected in classroom practice. Some very good adaptation of school policies is noted, while a continued focus on assessment for learning, including on syllabus aims and learning outcomes, is recommended for some lessons observed. Systemic and formal assessment practices include the holding of in-house examinations for all classes at Christmas, mock examinations in spring for classes due to sit certificate examinations, and end-of-year examinations for all other classes in summer. Annual parent-teacher meetings, supported by the school’s reporting system, class teacher and year head structure also ensure that appropriate formal structures are in place to support home-school contacts and awareness in relation to students’ progress.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The organisation and co-ordination of the special educational needs provision has been an identified priority for the school in recent years. A dedicated room and resource area has been assigned to the provision of one-to-one and small-group learning support. The print-rich environment and furniture lay-out of the room is conducive to work with small groups and individuals. Where appropriate, the use of small groups rather than one-to-one is suggested, as the dynamic of a small group can enhance learning and motivation and will also maximise the use of the special educational needs’ allocation. Material resources are well organised and the room provides storage for student files and materials. Systems of monitoring student progress and attainment have been developed.

Examination of school documentation indicates that individual education plans are in place for all students with resource hours and this is commended. Parents are involved and consulted in drawing up individual plans for students and reporting on student progress is communicated on an ongoing basis. This is inclusive and transparent. When necessary, a short meeting for parents of students with special needs is facilitated as an integral part of the parent-teacher meeting. The planning documentation and records in relation to meeting the students’ individual learning needs are clearly presented and efficiently organised.

Personnel assigned to learning-support tuition are well qualified. Staff have been facilitated in the past to attend CPD relating to the area of special educational needs.Attendance at activities provided in the SEN area is recommended to ensure that knowledge and awareness of approaches and resources are kept up-to-date. Teachers work closely with the guidance service and liaison between the learning-support co-ordinator and subject teachers is reportedly regular and good. The co-ordinator ensures that learning support is also provided to additional students identified in the course of the school year as requiring extra support. This is good practice. Work on the current special educational needs policy is well advanced and senior management and teachers should finalise the policy for ratification by the board as soon as possible. Whole-school training on the range
of learning difficulties and teaching strategies for the mainstream classroom is recommended for the future.

The integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds is managed effectively. An example is the policy developed by the school to address consistency and practice in relation to students’ wearing of the hijab. It is particularly commendable that the contribution of students from the diversity of ethnic backgrounds is positively acknowledged in the RSE policy. The good practice of using CSPE and SPHE as effective vehicles to foster a supportive whole-school climate and the integration of students from minority religions and backgrounds is well established in Jesus and Mary College. Cultural diversity and intercultural awareness are themes also celebrated at assemblies and during pastoral care.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The quality of the guidance service is very good and fulfils a crucial role in the successful transfer of students into the school, in devising and advising on subject options and in the effective provision of ongoing career guidance and counseling. The guidance service works with students both individually and in groups to support them in making subject and career choices. An excellent subject-guidance plan has been developed and all policies relating to student care are in place. The guidance service has engaged regularly with CPD and this has a positive impact on systems developed. The whole-school dimension to guidance planning should now be developed to augment the work completed to date. Senior management should consider revitalising the useful forum for guidance planning which had been in place.

There is a very good pastoral care system in place for students, involving defined roles for year heads, class tutors, subject teachers and student prefects. The contribution of the class tutors to the holistic development of students through their pastoral care is commended. One pastoral care lesson observed was instructional in its content and approach, a second lesson observed involved affirmation of work, checking of journals and awarding of merits for the quality of work completed by students. Year heads report to senior management in relation to student progress and welfare on a weekly basis. A system should now be established, whereby senior management meets with the guidance counsellor, the year heads and class tutors as a group on a regular basis.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Jesus and Mary College is an effective school in many aspects of its provision. The core work of the school, the quality of teaching and learning, is good.
- The quality teaching, combined with the well-structured pastoral care system and the prefect system, contributes to ensuring an atmosphere of care, shared goals, purposeful learning and good relationships.
- It was praiseworthy to observe the extent to which school management and staff consistently implements measures to ensure that students are being supported to achieve their maximum potential within subjects and programmes.
- The dedication of senior management to achieve the school’s aims was clear and their vision for the future guides and informs their work at every level.
- The desire of both senior management and the board of management to sustain a good level of student attainment have been achieved through careful attention and monitoring.
• Care and attention has been given to enhancing the quality of teaching and of teaching resources, including the development of the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure within the school.
• Both in terms of its composition and the implementation of its role, the board fulfils the requirements of the Education Act, 1998 well. Board members bring a complementary range of skills to their work. The focus of the board’s deliberations is appropriately student-centred.
• It is clear that a consultative approach has been taken by school management to developing, ratifying, implementing and reviewing school policies.
• Communication systems are being developed for effective and meaningful communication with parents and the wider school community.
• There are many strands to the curriculum offered in Jesus and Mary College and the range of subjects is commendable.
• In all lessons observed across the range of subjects and programmes, a very pleasant and respectful classroom atmosphere obtained, with very good teacher-student rapport.
• The efforts of those involved in organising co-curricular and extra-curricular initiatives and activities are highly commendable.
• Students’ attainment in the certificate examinations reflects a high uptake of higher level in both Junior and Leaving Certificate and good to very good attainment at both higher and ordinary levels.
• Good support structures for students with additional educational needs are in place.
• The integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds is managed effectively.
• The quality of the guidance service is very good.
• There is a very good pastoral care system in place for students, involving defined roles for year heads, class tutors, subject teachers and student prefects.

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

• It is recommended that the board initiate a process of strategic planning to address the challenge of sustaining and increasing enrolment and to identify what is critical to the school’s success and growth.
• The question of the overall development of the campus and the school grounds is one which needs to be addressed by the board with the trustees.
• Senior management and staff with leadership roles within the school are encouraged to engage in development opportunities provided by the Le Chéile trust.
• Senior management, together with staff, should sustain efforts to manage and to improve processes of communication, exploiting the use of technology to foster links with the wider school community.
• It is recommended that the structure of the school day and week be reviewed from a student-centred perspective, to consider, for example, a longer lunch break which could support extra-curricular activity or simply more social interaction between students.
• It is recommended that a curriculum advisory group be established to review how the school presents the curriculum and to explore the principles which underpin the decisions in relation to the curriculum.
• A whole-school review and analysis of current needs of the school should be undertaken. Such a review could form the basis for a strategic five-year plan of consolidation, improvement and development.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. **RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS**

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:
- Subject Inspection of History – 16 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 22 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of SPHE – 17 September 2009
- Subject Inspection of TY – 20 October 2009

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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 Jesus and Mary College would like to thank the Inspectors who carried out the Inspection for their professionalism and understanding during a time of national Industrial unrest in the education sector. The Board welcome the affirmation of good practice in our school. The high quality of teaching and learning together with the dedication of senior management, as noted in the report, all contribute to an excellent student centred learning environment.

In responding we would like to draw attention to the fact that the school building was constructed in 1966 to accommodate a student cohort of 350. Rooms which were not originally intended as classrooms required conversion into classrooms to accommodate the increasing student numbers. The present numbers now facilitate the opportunity to:

- Enhance the teaching and learning environment of both students and teachers.
- Convert some classrooms into specialist rooms and some smaller rooms were designated for office use. In addition a designated resource room was established and the room originally allocated as a library is now being used as a classroom.
- Refurbish the learning environment for our school community.
- Concentrate on enhancing the quality of education for our students.
- Work towards developing an e-learning environment.

Due to the current economic climate it is anticipated that numbers will increase as more families join the Free Education system.
Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

Thanks to the long term generosity of our parents we have now three tennis courts and a basketball court which were installed during the months of July and August 2010.

The development of the campus surrounding the school is a priority for the Board and will be addressed with the Trustees as recommended in the WSE and incorporated in our strategic plan. The Board have approved the provision of a leased temporary building, as an interim measure, to alleviate the current lack of canteen facilities.

It is our intention to ensure that continued improvements may be made to the campus and the sporting facilities enhanced for our students. Our immediate priority is the requirement of a full size sports hall for which we are in the process of submitting a request to the Department for capital funding.

From September 2010 Interactive Whiteboards have been installed in all classrooms.

Curriculum
As Transition Year is compulsory from 2011 and with the consequent pressure on space, our curriculum planning focus will be on this area for the immediate future. It is our aim to ensure we provide a Transition Year programme which all parents and students regard as high quality and educationally beneficial.

The History allocation for Transition Year has increased to two periods effective from September 2010 as recommended during the WSE.

Two further Mathematics teachers are being provided with opportunities to teach Higher Maths in Leaving Certificate effective from September 2010.

Assessment
Recognising the importance of regular assessment and in order to keep parents fully informed of the progress of their children, from September 2010 the number of reports which parents will receive will increase to four per year.