Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Mary’s Secondary School
Convent of Mercy, Charleville, County Cork
Roll number: 62450H

Date of inspection: 23 October 2009
Whole-School Evaluation

A whole-school evaluation of St Mary’s Secondary School, Charleville 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 four subjects and in special educational needs were evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these. (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

The Sisters of Mercy established their convent in Charleville in 1834 with a view to providing education for girls. The actual foundation stone of the convent is located in a little courtyard within the current school building. The school started from very humble origins, when in 1840 the Sisters began providing secondary education for girls in a room in the convent. Much development ensued in the latter one hundred and seventy or so years, and the current school building, comprising a building dating back to 1894 which has been completely renovated and a modern extension, can be described as a high quality structure. The extended and entirely refurbished school, together with a new gymnasium, was officially opened in November 2000 by the then Minister for Education and Science, Michéal Martin.

St Mary’s Secondary school is a voluntary, single sex, girls’ school, which is now run under the trusteeship of CEIST. It has a current enrolment of 378 students from Charleville town and a rural hinterland comprised of North Cork and West Limerick. The school is non-fee paying, although parents are invited to give an annual contribution to the school. The school welcomes all students.

1. Quality of School Management

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

A clear consensus exists in relation to what is recognised as the characteristic spirit of St Mary’s Secondary School in Charleville. When various individuals were asked to describe this spirit the following three phrases were consistently used: “the students come first”, both in a collective and in an individual sense; “meeting students’ wide-ranging needs” and “individual attention and care”. This spirit and intention is summarised and clearly articulated in the school’s mission statement which states: “The aim of St Mary’s Secondary School is to provide holistic education, in the Catholic tradition, for all our students. We are committed to the academic, creative, spiritual, emotional and physical development of each student, in a caring and safe environment.” A set of accompanying declarations elaborates on and extends this overall vision by emphasising the school’s role in each of the following: preparing students for adult life; promoting a co-operative spirit; awakening in students the need to live in reverence with the world and thereby respect life and the earth; developing a healthy self-image and the ability to live from within in peace; nurturing a sense in students of their cultural identity whilst embracing diversity; and
assisting students to develop morally, socially, culturally and politically. The vision is an all-inclusive vision, and while it is ambitious, it was found to be lived out on a day-to-day basis in the school. All school policies make reference to the mission statement, indicating that it is, as was stated, the starting point for everything that happens and therefore the source of direction for all decisions and related activities.

While sentiments are one thing and words another, it is the actions that are the true indication of a school’s characteristic spirit. In St Mary’s it is clear that actions, which manifest themselves in the school’s many practices and procedures, allow for a very effective communication of the school’s spirit. Furthermore, as it is people who are responsible for actions, it can be concluded that the members of the board, the senior management team, the staff, and the members of the parents’ association of St Mary’s are the very embodiment of the characteristic spirit and, thereby, are a concrete representation of an otherwise abstract concept. Each group works together, and in a very committed fashion, for the good of the students. Each group goes about its work with energy, enthusiasm, care, concern, positivity and an acute and very distinct sense of fun.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management of St Mary’s Secondary School was found to be functioning very effectively. The inspection team concurs with the board members in what they identified as their key strengths: a clear and shared understanding of their role; an awareness of what the school is about; an appreciation of school ethos; a good work ethic; a sense of humanity; a positive attitude; intelligence; diversity and gender balance; and a very strong senior management team.

The board is properly constituted and is comprised of eight members who are representative of all nominating bodies. A trustees’ nominee acts as chairperson to the board and the principal acts as secretary. A percentage of board members have served on the board previously while other members are newly appointed. This combination, which provides for continuity and experience, in tandem with access to new ideas and fresh approaches, is very positive. The contribution of the chairperson, who has been involved with the school in various capacities for almost twenty years, is worthy of particular mention and acknowledgement.

Following the amalgamation of five religious congregations, the school is now under the trusteeship of CEIST, whose mission and core values strongly resonate with that of the schools. As the Sisters of Mercy did before, CEIST seeks to support the board in matters pertinent to the perpetuation and development of the school. This includes, for example, the provision of training for board members, which was attended by all during the first year of the current board’s three-year term of office. Teachers’ representatives have also availed of training provided by the teachers’ unions and the finance committee has accessed training in matters relating to school finance.

Formal board meetings are held regularly, once every six weeks or approximately three times per term. It is very positive that the dates of each board meeting are agreed in advance of the publication of the school calendar in September. The fact that the board meets so often is indicative of the board’s commitment to, and its interest and involvement in, the operation and performance of the school. In addition, the board also arranges ad-hoc meetings on a needs basis. The board’s finance sub-committee meets prior to each formal meeting of the board and provides a report regarding school finance to each board meeting. In addition, the school accounts are also audited.

Board members demonstrate a very healthy working relationship. Decisions are reached in a transparent and consultative manner. Open discussion relating to all matters seeks to
ensure that board decisions are based on agreement or consensus. At no point has a vote been required in order to decide a course of action. This is very positive. Significantly, assurances were also provided that students’ welfare dictates all board decisions. Board members are very clear on their collective role, which they fulfil to the very best of their collective ability. The board’s appreciation of and for the work of the senior management team, together with the teaching staff, is very obvious.

The board recognises the role it plays in preserving the school’s ethos, which is inextricably linked to the school’s characteristic spirit and the mission statement. Minutes of meetings illustrate a concern for and interest in individual students. This supports the school’s vision that the students come first and that care for all students is paramount. Board members are deserving of particular credit for this very notable degree of concern and the associated depth of interest.

The board has arranged for the preparation of a school plan and oversees the development of all school policies, discussing at length, contributing to and ratifying all such policies. Almost all of the legally required policies have been adopted and ratified by the board. The board is encouraged in its intentions to advance and progress the development of the three remaining legally required policies namely: the school’s Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy, its attendance strategy and its data protection policy. The board feels that the process of school development planning has resulted in better planning for the future, increased accountability and enhanced communication between all partners. Board members are encouraged to explore how they might strengthen the role that board members play in the identification of developmental priorities for the school and in the evaluation of the associated action plans.

The board demonstrates an obvious pro-activity in relation to the school building and the associated accommodation, as is evidenced in section 1.4.

Clearly, and as it was described, the relationship between the board and the senior management team is very good. The chairperson acts as the conduit between the board and the principal in between board meetings. The principal acknowledged the value of this interaction, which is due largely to the chairperson’s previously referenced long association with the school, as well as the chairperson’s keen interest in school business and her genuine concern for all members of the school community. The chairperson has a very visible presence in the school, frequently visiting the staffroom over the course of each school term and attending many school events.

Strong lines of communication exist between the board and the various partners. CEIST is provided with a copy of the minutes of each meeting. Following each board meeting a written report is provided to the teaching staff, while a verbal report is provided to the parents’ association. The board is encouraged to formalise the reporting procedures to the members of the parents’ association with regard to board business through, for example, the preparation of an agreed report following each board meeting. This report should be communicated to teachers and parents alike. The principal’s report, which is provided at each board meeting, is recognised by the board members as invaluable, informing board members of school activities and allowing the board to formally recognise and acknowledge student and staff involvement in a myriad of activities and projects. Its role in fostering the attendance of board members at upcoming events was also acknowledged.

1.3 In-school management

The principal, who was appointed to the role in 2003, plays a pivotal role in the management and operation of the school. She is highly committed to the school, is appreciative of and cares for the staff, and is genuinely interested and concerned for all
students. She is ably assisted in the day-to-day management of the school by a recently appointed deputy principal, who is equally committed to the school and is equally appreciative of what is understood as important in the school.

The senior management team demonstrates a very strong, working relationship. There is an obvious interdependence, with each member of the team gaining benefit from the presence of the other. The senior management team presents a united front in the staffroom and on the corridors. The principal and deputy principal possess a shared vision for the school which was summarised as follows: “Our ultimate aim is that every child achieves to the very best of their ability... and we seek to provide all the support that we can in order to make this vision a reality”. This shared vision supports a team approach to the overall management of the school.

While a division of tasks exists between the principal and deputy principal, it is clear that a partnership approach to the management of the school has been adopted. It is strongly suggested that a detailed role profile be prepared for each position and then filed in the school plan. This would ensure that the members of the wider school community, together with the members of the senior management team, gain a fuller, more quantifiable realisation of the amount of work undertaken as part of the role of principal and deputy principal in St Mary’s Secondary School. Regular meetings of principal and deputy principal, both formal and informal, foster collaboration and promote a spirit of collegiality. These meetings allow for a constructive exchange of information that is relevant to the day-to-day management of the school and which is essential to its smooth operation.

Both members of the senior management team demonstrate clear leadership qualities. Their leadership style is clearly one whereby they seek to inspire staff members to higher levels of motivation, participation and performance. It is also clear that St. Mary’s is an organisation where individuals help, encourage and look out for each other, as well as for the organisation as a whole. This is a very positive finding. Leadership is also devolved to all willing participants, including post-holders and non post-holders. There is a very strong spirit of volunteerism in the school, with several examples provided of where, for example, non post-holders assume responsibility for various areas that are recognised in the school as in need of co-ordination. This spirit is highly praised, as is management’s outlook which openly encourages and facilitates staff to lead projects they recognise as important or even necessary. It was clear that the senior management team are very proud of all staff members, as are the board.

The senior management team highlighted the effective and efficient manner in which the school’s five assistant principals and nine special duties teachers, whose roles and responsibilities are defined, carry out their assigned duties. The preparation of a more detailed, written role profile for each post-holder would serve a similar purpose to that outlined earlier in relation to the preparation of a role profile for the principal and deputy principal, in that it would allow for an even clearer understanding of each post-holder’s agreed roles and responsibilities. The contribution that post-holders, in combination with non post-holders, make to the smooth operation of the school is recognised and valued by the senior management team. Post-holders are provided with significant scope from management to develop the duties attached to individual posts. The last major review of the school’s schedule of posts predates the current principal. In light of changes in staffing, actual or imminent and arising from promotion or retirement, it is recommended that the whole-staff meet to discuss the school’s needs and the extent to which the needs are being met by the current post structure. As a result of this discussion, there may need to be some tailoring of the post structure, and the prioritisation of certain duties.

The school’s system of communication is, undeniably, one of its most positive features and a significant strength. Formal communications are supported by a structured programme of
weekly and monthly meetings and regular staff meetings, as well as staff-room memos, notices and announcements. In addition, a calendar, which is prepared by senior management in advance of the school re-opening in September, is issued to all staff. This details all meetings and key events known at the time of publication. The structured programme of weekly and monthly meetings ensures an efficient and effective flow of information between the senior management team and key school personnel. This includes formal meetings with the year heads, the members of the special educational needs team, the guidance counsellor, the home school community liaison teacher and, as required, the programme co-ordinators. A monthly meeting of year heads and class tutors is also arranged. It is clear that the senior management team places great value on staff contributions and therefore facilitating staff input. Both formal and informal communications are fostered by very positive relations and a very open and collegial atmosphere, as well as a very obvious friendliness, generosity and understanding.

The school welcomes all students, operating a very open enrolment and admissions policy. The diversity of the student population bears testament to this finding. Some minor adjustments need to be made to the admissions policy to reflect the very open enrolment processes evident in the school. An open-house evening helps the school to showcase, for prospective students and their parents, what life in St Mary’s Secondary School is like. It also provides a forum in which students and parents can have queries answered and concerns addressed. In addition, the principal and other staff members are available by prior appointment to meet with parents and students on a one-to-one basis. This reflects the school’s open-door policy and can be availed of by all students in the school, from prospective first-year students right through to Leaving Certificate students. This is deserving of credit.

The school’s code of behaviour is clearly presented, outlining expectations and detailing the procedures that apply in cases of non-compliance. Its effectiveness is clearly evident in the fact that no student has ever been expelled from the school and that suspensions are very infrequent. This indicates a very healthy and successful approach to the management of student behaviour. In keeping with the spirit of the school’s mission statement, the school was found to have a caring and positive attitude to discipline. This was reinforced by senior management who highlighted that in instances of indiscipline “the school looks beyond the incident, seeking to identify the root of the problem”. It is clear therefore, and as highlighted in the students’ journal, that disciplinary decisions are taken in a spirit of concern. The parents’ association referred to the “clean slate” approach to indiscipline, whereby issues are dealt with and students get a chance to start afresh. The board, the senior management team, the parents’ association and the students themselves referred to very positive teacher-student relations. Year heads, class tutors and subject teachers assist management in the fostering of acceptable behaviour and in the monitoring and handling of unacceptable behaviour. Senior management spoke very favourably of the school’s year-head structure, describing it as very productive in terms of the management of students, and therefore the school. It is positive that year-group assemblies are provided regularly. These are viewed as a communications mechanism that reinforces school values and related expectations, while also supporting the affirmation of students’ achievements and accomplishments. The formal recognition of students’ successes is noted as very positive.

Much time and energy goes into recording, monitoring and reporting on students’ attendance and, to this end, very effective systems have been established. The involvement of a cross-section of people, including parents, year heads, the deputy principal, subject teachers, class tutors and the administration staff, working together on a daily basis, contributes to the success of the systems that have been put in place. The discussion at the weekly year-head meetings of attendance data was observed as being tremendously valuable. The further discussion of attendance at the monthly year-head and class-tutor meetings is just as valuable. A mentor is assigned to students who demonstrate poor
attendance levels in combination with difficulties or issues in coming to school. This additional support is very highly praised.

The school provides a comprehensive record system for all students. A folder is maintained with information relating to, for example, students’ academic progress, correspondence with home and meetings with parents. The students’ journal provides a way to monitor students’ attendance, their application to their studies and their general participation.

A students’ council is facilitated by management to play a formal role in the life of the school. Established in 2005, good supporting structures have been put in place. For example, a liaison teacher oversees and supports the work of the council and a constitution has been prepared and ratified. The council is representative of different year groups and different nationalities. The work of the council, as recounted by the members themselves, illustrates that in St Mary’s Secondary School students play an active role in the life of the school. Their voice is sought and listened to by senior management, as well as by staff generally. Most importantly, they feel and they believe that their opinions matter. This is most obvious in work recently completed in relation to the school canteen and the new school uniform. The council meets regularly and, in between meetings, makes use of a centrally located notice-board to communicate with the student body. In their discussions with members of the school’s students’ council, the members of the inspection team were particularly struck by the students’ confidence, insightfulness and maturity. The appointment of a head girl and deputy head girl, which is an honorary position in the school, also promotes formal student involvement in school life.

Parental involvement is strongly encouraged in St Mary’s Secondary School. A parents’ association was established in the school in 2004 and has since gone from strength to strength. In fact, when the association was asked to identify their most significant achievement to date, they highlighted the fact that they had built up the association in such a short space of time, thereby fostering an open and very strong relationship with the school for interested parents. The representative group of parents who met the evaluation team as part of the Whole School Evaluation were impressive. Undeniably, the group makes a very significant contribution to the life and work of the school. The association is actively involved in a myriad of different activities, including the very important area of policy development and review. When asked to outline their ambitions for the association it was clear that the members have a shared vision and an abundance of energy and enthusiasm for the various projects they are planning. Both the parents’ association and the students’ council, while not long established, can be described as vibrant. Their stated intention to forge greater links between the two groups is fully encouraged.

Good lines of communication exist between the school and various external agencies, with a view to providing for students’ needs. This promotes ongoing dialogue while supporting students’ progress and development. Clear lines of communication exist between school and home. A number of notable links have been established by the school with local businesses and community groups. For example, the annual awards are sponsored by local businesses and students’ work experience is dependent on the co-operation of businesses and organisations in the local community and the surrounding areas.

As will be evident from Sections 2 and 3.1, all school personnel engage in self-evaluation and review on a constant and ongoing basis.

1.4 Management of resources

With reference to CL M29/95, the provision of twenty-eight hours and twenty minutes of instruction time is praiseworthy. Teachers’ timetables issued following the evaluation indicate that all permanent whole-time teachers are timetabled for the required number of
class contact hours. Teachers are appropriately deployed, according to their qualifications, experience, expertise and interests. General deployment of teachers is satisfactorily used to achieve the academic and pastoral aims of the school. To this end, the staff’s commitment, dedication and professionalism is acknowledged and affirmed.

In conjunction with the board, both principal and deputy principal are very supportive of the staff’s continuing professional development (CPD). Members of staff were also found to be deeply committed to their own CPD, attending any available in-service courses or workshops. Staff members are given the opportunity to report back at staff meetings. It was suggested that the maintenance of a file where teachers would provide a record of what might have been garnered from the attendance at a workshop or CPD session, which might be of interest or value to other staff members, be considered. In addition, there is evidence of the whole staff receiving in-house input from external agencies. This too is very positive.

An induction programme for new staff members has been established. The members of the senior management team play a pivotal role in the induction of new staff members in relation to school systems and procedures. They are simultaneously supported in this task by the relevant subject department. A staff handbook has also been developed, which provides very valuable information to both existing and new members of staff. It is suggested that this handbook could be further developed to ensure that, in addition to organisational information, it might also make some provision for information that would relate to classroom practice, thereby also providing inspiration.

The school building is very well developed, providing very good-quality facilities and an attractive environment, both of which support teaching and learning in the school. Much credit is due to the Sisters of Mercy for their support of the upgrading and expansion of the school. The recent work that has been carried out in relation to the school library, the Transition Year wing and the parents’ room, is indicative of management’s ongoing planning for the development and enhancement of the school facilities. The school prayer room is deserving of particular mention. This once-off design and creation provides a very special place in the school that is supportive of reflection and prayer. The school climate is enhanced by the liberal and very public display of, for example, students’ work, photographs and awards. Students also have access to high quality sports facilities. This includes a full-sized hall and a grass pitch, as well as a hard-court area which is primarily used for tennis. In addition, the availability of an excellent range of equipment and materials supports teachers to adequately cover all core areas of activity in Physical Education. Both the buildings and the school grounds are very well maintained. In light of this finding, the significant contribution of the caretaking and cleaning staff must be acknowledged and applauded. The important and, in this case, the distinct role played by the administrative staff is also acknowledged and praised, both in the fulfilment of duties and in its contribution to the pastoral care of students.

While subject departments are not allocated budgets, requests for resources are favourably considered, as budgets permit. Subject departments, in particular those involved in the WSE, were found to be well resourced and equipped. A tour of the school building suggested that other departments, including specialist rooms, are equally well resourced and equipped. Management is applauded for this very good level of provision for subjects.

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into learning and teaching is being supported by management, as is evident in the overall resourcing of and access to ICT facilities in the school. Internet access is available throughout the school either through cabled or wireless networks, and supervised internet access is allowed under the school’s acceptable use policy. Management has provided data projectors and interactive whiteboards to encourage the use of ICT in the classroom. A school website has
been developed and it is used to communicate with parents and the wider community, as well as for the publication of students’ work. All of this is extremely positive.

The school is very proactive in relation to health and safety and much good work has been completed by management in this area, with the assistance of the school’s health and safety officer. A safety statement has been developed. The fact that this is reviewed on an annual basis is very positive. With a view to enhancing the statement, the preparation of detailed, subject-specific statements is recommended for consideration. The board is encouraged to continue in its efforts to reach a reasonable and safe solution regarding the school entrance.

The school is an active participant in the Green Schools Programme, and has applied for its first green flag. This is highly praised. In addition to this students are encouraged to get involved in many other school-based projects which are designed to promote environmental awareness and appreciation on a whole-school level. Students, for example, raised funds to purchase a set of bins designed to assist students and members of the school community in the task of waste segregation. In addition, a school garden containing apple trees, gooseberry bushes and a selection of vegetables is being propagated. A bird feeder has also been put in place. All of this is in line with the aim of the school’s vision where it is stated: “To enable the students to live a reverent relationship with all of creation and to nurture in them a respect for life and a care for the earth”. This vision, along with the aforementioned associated actions, is laudable.

In discussions held over the course of the WSE the board and senior management team identified the teaching and support staff as the school’s greatest resource. This is a tremendous recognition, and one for which much evidence was found over the course of the whole school evaluation.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School Development Planning (SDP) records, which date back to 2003-2004, provide a chronological and comprehensive overview of the development of SDP in St Mary’s. One of the most striking features of these records is that they indicate that time is provided periodically for the members of the school community to reflect on, review, embed and, most importantly, acknowledge work completed. The provision of such time for these four key activities, which are essential to successful and worthwhile planning, is very highly praised. This ensures that members of the school community are enabled appropriately to contribute ideas, express concerns and make suggestions in an open and constructive way. This is a very positive finding.

The board of management, together with the principal and deputy principal, recognise the sense of ownership that SDP has facilitated in the school. Simultaneously, the scope for meaningful participation that SDP planning offers is also recognised and valued by management. Progress made strongly suggests that SDP is fully embraced by all members of the teaching staff. This can be attributed in part to the fact that a professional approach, positive relations and reflective and forward thinking are fostered and supported in the school.

Planning work has benefited from input by personnel attached to the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), as well as that of other qualified personnel, and from the templates and resources available on the SDPI website. School planning activities are effectively co-ordinated by the deputy principal, who is ably assisted in the task by another staff member, while being supported in the task by the principal. There is evidence that the
approach to all planning work follows a well-established framework. A very strong culture of working in task groups exists in the school and it is clear that it is fully accepted as the *modus operandi* for the task of SDP. Whole-staff sessions, together with an overriding spirit of collegiality, have undoubtedly contributed to this culture. All of this has contributed to the progress that has been made, as has the spirit of volunteerism amongst staff which was communicated to the inspection team by the board and the members of the senior management team.

In terms of planning outcomes, the permanent section of the school plan is well developed. This part of the plan documents practices and procedures in relation to many aspects of school life. The provision of a contents page is suggested, which would guide all concerned through the plan. The developmental section of the school plan demonstrates a clear identification of annual planning priorities. The documents relating to this section indicate that the school has witnessed much positive change since 2003 and that the process is based on school self-evaluation, review and prioritisation. Simultaneously it is clear that SDP has resulted in significant improvements in students’ experiences in the school. Such documents also illustrate that strategies are put in place annually in order to achieve identified priorities. It is very positive that the whole staff is involved in the identification of annual planning priorities and that action plans have been prepared for the current priorities. It is suggested that future action plans might also make reference to timeframes and required resources.

Furthermore, in relation to the outcomes of the school’s planning process, a large number of policies have been developed and ratified. This includes sixteen established policies, with two more policies being currently developed. The school’s code of behaviour is also up for review with a view to ensuring that the revised version will be in line with the advice and recommendations provided in the National Educational Welfare Board’s publication *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools*. Ratification dates are clear on all policies. It is suggested that, in addition to the provision of ratification dates, a proposed review date be provided on each policy at the time of ratification. Furthermore, some consideration might be given to the publication of ratified policies on the school’s website. The adoption of a recording system that would summarise, for each year, the completed elements of the school plan, the ratified policies, the remaining areas requiring policies, progress relating to identified priorities and detail relating to future priorities is proposed for consideration by management and staff.

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.

Subject department planning is firmly established in St Mary’s Secondary School. Departmental structures with appointed co-ordinators are in place for all subjects. The subject-specific plans reviewed as part of the WSE were found to be well developed. Common programmes of work are in place and teachers’ work in this regard is highly praised.

The next step for the school might be to look at how SDP might be moved into another phase, one that includes but extends beyond the development of a school plan, school policies, and subject plans, and towards a whole-school focus that would support planning
for the enhancement of an already, recognisably good quality of teaching and learning. This, in turn, would lead to the achievement of even more favourable outcomes that are focused particularly on maintaining and improving the standard of students’ learning. Section 4 of this report, in particular section 4.1, will provide further direction in relation to this proposal.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The provision of a broad and balanced curriculum is central to curriculum provision in St Mary’s Secondary School, with every effort being made to seek to provide for the broadest range of students’ interests and needs. As a result, students are offered an impressive range and number of programmes and subjects.

Programmes offered include Junior Certificate, established Leaving Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school has considered the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme but is confident in its ability and capacity to be able to support all students in their pursuit of the established Leaving Certificate. The additional effort and energy that is required of the teaching staff in the school in order to make this belief a reality is recognised and acknowledged.

First-year students study eighteen subjects. These include: Gaeilge, English, Mathematics, History, Geography, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religion, Physical Education, Computer Studies and Science, all of which are offered as core subjects on the school’s junior cycle curriculum. The remaining seven subjects, namely Art, Craft and Design, Business Studies, French, Home Economics, Materials Technology (Wood), Music and Spanish, are offered as optional subjects from second year. Students’ exposure to this large number of subjects is facilitated, in the main, by the operation of a taster programme, which is described in the school plan as one of the distinguishing features of the school, successfully introducing students to no less than seven optional subjects. This provision is praised as it fosters informed decision-making in relation to subject choice. Second-year and third-year students undertake the same eleven core subjects identified previously, plus three of the seven optional subjects offered in the school.

Fifth-year and sixth-year students study four core subjects, namely Gaeilge, English, Mathematics and Religion, with some provision also for Physical Education, ECDL, and Social and Health Education. Senior cycle students also study four of a possible twelve optional subjects. These include: Accounting, Art, Biology, Business, Chemistry, French, Geography, History, Home Economics, Music, Physics and Spanish. The fifth-year timetable provides two double periods per week whereby students can access Computer Studies, Physical Education, Social and Health Education, additional support or one of the LCVP link modules. A similar arrangement operates in sixth year. It would appear, however, that this arrangement does not guarantee access to all of these subjects for all students, particularly if a student opts to do the LCVP programme. As a result, it is suggested that this system be reviewed, with a view to ensuring equality of access for all students to all available subjects or, as needs pertain, the implementation of a reduced option list.

The fact that the school offers two foreign languages in both junior and senior cycles is good, as is its provision for Materials Technology (Wood) in junior cycle.
Overall, subjects were found to be appropriately timetabled, in accordance with syllabus recommendations or relevant Department of Education and Science (DES) circulars. The one exception to this finding is the timetabling of Physical Education, which will be addressed in more detail in the following paragraph. It is positive that double periods are provided for subjects for which such provision is recommended. The school operates a stand-alone subject band for languages in both second and third years. This means that double periods of French or Spanish can be avoided, and that students are assured more regular contact with the modern European language that they are studying.

Currently, in third year, Physical Education is timetabled for one single period. Taking into account the board of management’s view that older students are less inclined to participate in Physical Education lessons, it is worth noting that the short time available for lessons can be, in itself, demotivating for students. In participating in the implementation of the Junior Cycle Physical Education syllabus, and in order to meet the aims of the syllabus, schools are required to comply with the provisions of Circular M15/05. This recommends provision of a minimum time allocation of two periods per week at junior cycle, timetabled together. This needs to be addressed when timetabling Physical Education in third year in the future. The arrangement for Physical Education (PE) in senior cycle, as alluded to previously, means that a significant number of students may have no formal provision for physical activity each week. As highlighted previously in a 2007 subject inspection report relating to the quality of teaching and learning in Physical Education in the school, a variety of publications have highlighted the vital role that quality Physical Education can play in the fight against obesity, as well as its role in providing students with the foundation for an overall healthy, active lifestyle. It is therefore regarded as essential that all students are guaranteed timetabled provision in PE in both fifth and sixth years. It is recommended that the school revisits timetabling arrangements for Physical Education with a view to providing all students with timetabled provision in the subject in line with Department of Education and Science guidelines.

The TY and LCVP programmes are effectively co-ordinated, with every effort being made to provide students with a quality educational experience. TY in St Mary’s Secondary School, which is a firmly established and integral part of the school’s curriculum, has been offered as an optional programme for almost twenty years. The high number of students opting to do TY on an annual basis is clear testament to students’ positive experiences of the programme in the school. This year, for example, over sixty-five percent of the previous year’s Junior Certificate class opted to take part in TY. Students are required to apply for a place on the programme, and are interviewed. While applicants are not usually refused a place, in fact students’ participation is encouraged in the school, the application and interview process helps to ensure that students’ reasons for choosing TY are valid and that they are committed to participating fully in all organised activities. It is interesting that a letter issued to parents outlining the school’s acceptance of a student into the school’s TY programme contains the identification of criteria for successful participation and the encouragement of parental involvement. In fact letters are sent home to parents over the course of the school year. This is a good way of educating parents in relation to the programme and in harnessing their interest and engagement. A well-structured, formal curriculum is enhanced by the provision of a large range of complementary activities. Students study eight core subjects, including Gaeilge, Mathematics, English, French or Spanish, Music, Physical Education, Religion and Computer studies, the latter of which is used to deliver modules associated with the ECDL. In addition to these core subjects, half-year units are delivered in each of the following subject areas: Art, Biology, Business, Chemistry, Enterprise, Geography, Guidance, History, Home Economics and Physics. This arrangement is highly praised, as it helps students to make informed decisions in relation to subject choice in senior cycle. Furthermore, two triple periods each week are devoted to the delivery of modular programmes in a very diverse selection of areas. In the past this has included, for example, modules of aromatherapy, cake art and self-defence. This
timetabling arrangement also facilitates the provision of a series of workshops over the course of each year. Workshops engaged in previously include, for example, *Drive for Life*, *Public Access to Law* and *Deportment and Grooming*. Students also have access to a large number of optional, extracurricular activities, including an annual school tour to continental Europe. Students engage in three weeks work experience. The TY curriculum in the school is very good as, in the true spirit of the programme, it seeks to provide an appropriate balance between academic endeavours, personal development and recreational pursuits. The fact that portfolio assessment is an integral part of the school’s approach to the end-of-year assessment of TY students’ progress and achievement in TY is particularly praised.

The school is also to be applauded for providing TY certification, which is based on the outcomes of the portfolio assessment, as well as students’ attendance and participation. Ongoing evaluation is a central part of the programme, with parents and students, as well as teachers, being requested to complete evaluation sheets annually. This all-inclusive approach to curriculum review is highly praised. Teachers involved in the delivery of subjects and modules are encouraged to evaluate their individual programmes at regular intervals, and whole-staff review of TY is facilitated in May of each year. Individual teaching plans for all subjects, core and half-year units, are contained in the TY plan. Subject departments are encouraged to date such plans.

LCVP has been offered to the students of St Mary’s Secondary School for approximately sixteen years. The success of the school’s LCVP programme is very apparent in the fact that, as reported by the senior management team, all participating students use their LCVP grades in the calculation of their points for entry to third level. Uptake of the LCVP can be described as healthy, with approximately fifty percent of each fifth-year group participating in the programme each year. The teaching team has remained fairly constant over the years. This is recognised in the school as one of the strengths of the school’s current provision for the programme, as the members of the teaching team have accessed the necessary training and, most significantly, have experience in the correction of the relevant certificate examination modules. This deployment pattern, together with teachers’ commitment to their continuing professional development in relation to LCVP, is applauded. Work experience, which is recognised as an integral part of the programme nationally and of considerable value to learning in the programme generally, is provided as part of the school’s LCVP programme. This is positive. The LCVP syllabus requires all students who take the programme to follow a course in a modern European language other than English and Irish over the course of the two years of the programme. As a means of facilitating the participation of students who do not study a modern European language for Leaving Certificate, it is recommended that the school provide an *ab initio* language module. Recommended practice is to have one lesson per week throughout the two years of the programme. However, if this proves difficult, then a module of the same time equivalent can be provided for those students who need it. A comprehensive plan for this language module should be drawn up and the module should be delivered by a qualified language teacher. It would be important also that the school provide its own assessment criteria and certification for this module.

It is positive to note that, in the main, both junior and senior cycle classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis, in the belief that, and as stated by senior management, “all students achieve better in this type of environment”. The only exceptions to this approach to class organisation are found in the teaching of Gaeilge and Mathematics from second year, and the teaching of Gaeilge, Mathematics and English in senior cycle. In these instances, classes are divided into higher and ordinary levels. That said, students wishing to study a subject at higher level are facilitated by the school in doing so. This is facilitated in each of second, third, fifth and sixth years by concurrently timetabling Gaeilge, Mathematics and English. This timetabling arrangement also allows management to deploy additional teachers for the purpose of team teaching, a style that is currently viewed as one of the most
appropriate ways of providing for students with additional educational needs. The overall attitude and approach to class organisation in the school is highly praised.

Curricular planning and review takes place annually. This is very positive. There is also evidence to suggest that parents are openly consulted regarding any changes to the established curriculum. This level of parental inclusion is to be credited.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

The arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes in St Mary’s Secondary School were found to be very student focused. Much credit is due to management and all concerned staff members for this finding.

At all levels, school systems and procedures seek to maximise students’ choice in relation to available subjects and programmes. In first year, for example, the taster programme allows students to sample all subjects prior to making subject choices for the Junior Certificate examination. Likewise, students who participate in the school’s TY programme are advantaged by the fact that a form of taster programme is also provided as part of the very varied curriculum on offer.

While being mindful of the availability of both human and material resources, together with the viability of providing a programme or subject, every reasonable effort is made to facilitate students in their choice of subject or programme. Democratic systems are employed, with all subject blocks finding as their basis students’ individual and collective preferences. Students complete a form indicating, in order of preference, the subjects they would like to study for the relevant certificate examination. Prospective second-year students choose from seven optional subjects while prospective fifth-year students choose from no less than twelve optional subjects. This level of provision is to be credited. The data collected is then used to inform the design of ‘best fit’ subject blocks which, it is reported, satisfy the preferences of the vast majority of students. This approach, which is recognised as best practice, is highly praised.

Considerable time and energies are devoted to informing, guiding and supporting students in advance of the making of subject choices. Clearly, the school’s guidance counsellor makes a significant contribution in this regard. In the case of first-year students, for example, the guidance counsellor initiates the process with a short talk in mid-January. As a follow-up to this introduction, a second session is provided. Informal classroom visits are also carried out. Senior management has strategically scheduled the first-year parent-teacher meeting for February, providing parents with the opportunity to discuss with teachers, the various options available to their daughters. While this very structured and well-thought-out approach is intended to minimise a change of mind in September when classes have been formed and timetables have been prepared, it is good to note that the school still exercises a reasonable degree of flexibility in the case of students who feel that a subject choice they made was not the best one and seek to change an option subject.

At all levels, parents and students are kept very well informed in relation to programme and subject choice. Once again, the school’s guidance counsellor’s role is consequential. Class visits, individual appointments, information evenings for parents, career talks and subject-choice leaflets are but some of the measures employed to assist students and their parents in the very difficult task of making subject choices and, as applicable, programme choices. Year heads, class teachers and subject teachers also play an important role in terms of providing guidance, information and advice to students in relation to subjects and programmes.
Aspirations to study subjects at higher level are strongly cultivated by subject teachers in the school. It is important to highlight also however, that realistic teacher expectations do inform students’ final decisions with regard to preferred levels in the certificate examinations. It is good to note that parents and guardians are fully consulted prior to the introduction of a reduced curriculum, in instances where such an approach is appropriate or advisable.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

The very good level of provision in St Mary’s Secondary School for co-curricular and extracurricular activities is applauded. Activities organised and opportunities offered are wide ranging, seeking to provide for students’ aesthetic, cultural, local, social and sporting interests. In addition, new opportunities are constantly being explored. An impressive school newsletter acknowledges, publicises and promotes these additional school activities, as does the school prospectus. The view of both the parents’ association and the students’ council is that there is “something for everybody”. A healthy level of interest and participation by students in organised activities is reported.

The majority of activities are provided on a voluntary basis by teachers. This additional commitment and dedication is acknowledged and applauded. Many activities are subject-led, and therefore planned and provided by subject departments as part of planning for co-curricular and extracurricular learning in subjects. This is very positive. Teachers are strongly supported by both the senior management team and the board of management in planning and providing for co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Examples of the types of activities organised include: fieldtrips, excursions, visiting speakers, theatre trips and workshops, with each occurring over a large number of different subject areas. Participation in national events such as ‘Seachtain na Gaeilge’ is also promoted in the school.

Music enjoys a high profile in the school, inspiring students’ involvement in a myriad of activities and projects. Students are provided, for example, with the opportunity to learn an instrument, and are encouraged to become involved in the school orchestra or one of the school’s choirs. The organisation of a school musical is a tradition that has been fondly and successfully maintained in the school. The huge demands that a project of this nature places on the time and energies of the principal, deputy principal and teaching staff is recognised, and their efforts in this regard are highly praised.

Sporting interests are also well provided for, with students being given the opportunity to participate on a recreational, competitive and community basis. Camogie, basketball, soccer, horse-riding, golf and in recent times, arising from student demand, ladies’ football are provided for in the school. This provision is supported by access to very good facilities, as detailed in section 1.4 of this report. Good programmes, which include provision for coaching, meetings and matches, have been put in place for the three main sports. Historically the school has experienced much success in local and national competitions and events, especially in relation to Camogie. The girls have won over one hundred Camogie titles at various levels. These range from County to Munster to All-Ireland titles. In fact, St Mary’s Secondary School has topped the roll of honour of All-Irelands, by winning a grand total of thirty-one titles. Successes have also been experienced in relation to basketball and soccer.

Students are encouraged to get involved in fundraising activities. The development of this outlook in students is applauded. The school also participates on a regular basis in quizzes, debates, public-speaking events and competitions, which are often linked to the different subjects offered on the school’s curriculum.
Management and staff are encouraged to continue to sustain and develop this very important and significant part of school life.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

A very good standard of subject department planning is evident in St Mary’s Secondary School. Structures are in place to support teachers’ planning practice. For example, a co-ordinator has been appointed for each subject. It is good to note that in the majority of subject departments this position is rotated amongst all members of the department. Where feasible, and where this is not currently the case, this practice is strongly suggested for consideration across all subject departments. Formal and informal meetings are held regularly over the course of each school year. It is positive that minutes are maintained for each of the formal meetings convened. Where applicable, it is urged that the use of ICT for the recording and storage of such meetings be considered. Minutes suggest that operational matters and subject content are the main focus of planning meetings. Whilst recognising that this discussion must take place, it is suggested that there is scope during such meetings for a greater focus on matters such as, for example, teaching strategies, that might be deemed to impact more significantly on student learning. It is strongly advised that, with a view to guiding such discussions, a whole-school focus on teaching and learning might first be agreed. A number of possibilities exist here such as, for example, co-operative learning or assessment for learning. The opportunities that this would offer subject teachers in relation to the exploration of other possibilities in the context of their own classrooms are significant. The staff handbook, which is in place, might also be used as a means of supporting teachers in the newly identified whole-school focus.

As a result of high levels of collaboration amongst members of the various subject departments, very good progress has been made in the development of comprehensive subject plans for the teaching of the subjects inspected. The identification within the plans of supports and strategies for helping students with additional educational needs is particularly praiseworthy. Within subject department plans, time-based programmes of work have been agreed and prepared for each year group. This is positive. The use of ICT in the documentation of the various programmes of work is also urged. This would serve to considerably lessen the time and effort attached to the annual review and reshaping of programmes of work. A number of suggestions are offered in relation to how the programmes of work might be further developed. On a basic level this includes, for example, the preparation of syllabus versus text-book based programmes of work. In addition, it is strongly suggested that consideration be given to the grounding of programmes of work in syllabus-specific and perhaps, in time, topic-specific, learning outcomes. Furthermore, the identification of suitable teaching and learning strategies is strongly encouraged. The latter two developments would further promote professional dialogue, leading in turn to the sharing of good practice and knowledge within subject departments, while supporting a teaching and learning focus as a key element of collaborative subject department planning. A Transition Year programme has been prepared in each subject. A number of these programmes were praised for their approaches to subject areas which were described as imaginative and worthwhile and as ‘providing a bridge to the Leaving Certificate’.

Teachers engage in high-quality individual planning for lessons, which has a positive impact on lesson delivery and therefore student learning.

4.2 Learning and teaching
Based on the findings of the five subject inspections completed as part of this WSE, the overall quality of teaching and learning in St Mary’s Secondary School is very good.

The majority of lessons were very well paced and structured. Best practice was observed when and where the intended learning outcomes for a lesson were shared with students at the beginning of each lesson. This practice is advocated in all lessons. Teachers demonstrated a high degree of knowledge and expertise in their subject area, dealing with all students’ questions in a competent and confident manner.

A large number of high-quality resources were utilised over the course of lessons. Teachers are encouraged to look at how a greater sharing of individually sourced and prepared resources might be shared amongst members of subject departments. The use of electronic folders, which has been initiated by a number of subject departments already, is further encouraged as a possible means of facilitating this type of sharing.

A wide and varied range of methodologies was used in the lessons that were observed, and it was evident that, on the whole, teachers strive to make learning as active and as enjoyable as possible. Students’ active participation in lessons helped to maximise the opportunities for learning and aided them in gaining the greatest possible benefit from what was being taught. This approach is very highly praised. The incorporation of pair work and group work was observed in a number of lessons. To assist teachers in developing their use of pair work and group work, a number of valuable suggestions are offered in the accompanying subject inspection reports. In language lessons, best practice was where the target language was used both for classroom management and teaching purposes. In almost all lessons, teachers used very effective questioning strategies, with an appropriate balance between lower-order questions and higher-order questions. In general, students showed good competence and confidence in responding to questions posed by their teachers and by the inspectors.

A very good rapport exists between students and their teachers, leading to the prevalence of a very positive learning environment in all subjects evaluated. Classroom management was very good in all lessons, supported by the very good relationships that existed between students and teachers. Students’ contributions were encouraged and appropriately affirmed. In addition, the high quality of the physical learning environment contributed greatly to the management of lessons. A number of inspection reports referred to the classrooms providing a print-rich or resource-filled environment where there was a range of subject-related resources and materials visible to students.

4.3 Assessment

It is commendable that a range of assessment modes are utilised by subject departments in order to determine students’ progress and achievement. This includes, for example, in-class observation, questioning, topic tests and homework exercises. As appropriate, teachers also provide appropriately for the assessment of students’ aural and oral abilities. In addition to the good practice observed and noted, teachers are encouraged to continue to explore the use of additional assessment strategies. This might include, for example, self-assessment and peer-assessment. A strong advantage attached to the incorporation of these two strategies is that they ensure engagement on the part of all students during the in-class monitoring or marking of students’ homework or other assessment exercises. Useful material dealing with the overall area of assessment can be accessed at www.slss.ie and at www.ncca.ie.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and at the end of the academic year for non-examination classes. The increased use of common, formal assessment instruments
for year groups in both the Christmas and summer examinations is very good and, therefore, is further encouraged. The school has adopted a systematic approach to acknowledging students’ RACE (Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations) during the formal house examinations. This is highly praised. Students in third-year and sixth-year are assessed on a continuous and ongoing basis leading up to the October mid-term break. Performances in these assessments are used to inform an individual review of each student’s progress in which all subject teachers participate. Management’s provision for this review is highly praised, as is teachers’ willingness and desire to engage in it. Third-year and sixth-year students also participate in mock examinations in the early spring.

Homework is assigned and monitored regularly. The use of comment-based, formative assessment in the monitoring of students’ efforts is noted as positive, while the continued expansion of this practice is advocated. Much of the homework assigned to students is either written work, based on exercises from the textbook, or the learning of facts. Some variation in the type of homework assignments being set, or the manner in which homework is set, is therefore favoured. Some suggestions of alternative, additional exercises include, for example, investigations or research. Simultaneously, and given the wide range of interests and activities available to students in the school, the occasional use of poetry, music, drama or dance might also prove worthwhile in certain circumstances. In an effort to support all students, it is also suggested that differentiated homework would sit well with the differentiated practice that was witnessed in classrooms.

Teachers maintain records of students’ achievement, and these inform progress reports to students and parents alike. Good communication and reporting structures regarding students’ progress are in place. Parent-teacher meetings are held once a year for each year group. In addition, concerned parents can request an informal meeting with management or teachers as required. Written reports are sent home at mid-term and following each end-of-term assessment. Communication with home is also facilitated via the student journal, which parents are required to sign on a weekly basis. This structure is in fact recognised by both parents and teachers as foremost amongst the school’s communication and reporting structures and, as a result, is well utilised by both parties.

A frequent practice in subject departments is the analysis of students’ performance in the certificate examinations measured against national norms. Students’ results in the certificate examinations were found to compare favourably with the national norms. The analysis of uptake levels measured against national norms is advocated as a useful addition to current practice.

5. **QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

5.1 **Inclusion of students with additional educational needs**

The inspection report on the evaluation of support for students with additional educational needs which accompanies this WSE report, and includes the school’s provision for Traveller students, finds that the quality of supports for the inclusion of these students is of a high standard. The positive findings in this report are considerable. The recommendations are minimal, focusing mainly on aspects associated with assessment and with how best to share, among colleagues, existing good practices associated with teaching and learning. This is well within the capacity of the school. They also resonate with already documented priorities that have emerged from the school’s own self-evaluation processes. This is very positive and most refreshing. All concerned are referenced to this report for a more detailed evaluation of the school’s support for such students. What follows, is a brief synopsis of the school’s provision for students with additional educational needs.
The school welcomes all students. It is very obvious that senior management clearly understands the underlying principles of inclusion. The school has developed, implemented and continues to attend to the required policies on admissions, enrolment and participation of students with special educational needs. Other work in the areas of attendance, retention and access to third level was also seen to be effective.

The school’s policy on students with special educational needs is well constructed and focuses on many of the practical aspects associated with providing students with a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum. Resources provided are used for the purposes intended, and all available additional teaching hours are factored into the master timetable at the time of its construction. This is a very positive finding. A core team of teachers co-ordinate the school’s provision for students with special educational needs, all of whom have accessed post-graduate training in the area. The timetabling of a regular weekly meeting for the core team of teachers involved in special educational needs is good, as it helps to ensure the coordination of provision by the core team and facilitates communication with all colleagues. The core team was therefore found to work closely with colleagues to deliver support for students’ learning in a variety of ways, and in a way that is not only effective, but also reciprocal. Support, which is varied, is provided in a flexible and student-focused manner. It includes individual student withdrawal, small-group withdrawal and, very commendably, team teaching. Early communication with primary schools and ongoing communication with parents supports provision. Furthermore, there are good material resources available in the school for supporting students with additional educational needs. This includes a designated support room which houses relevant and suitable materials. This room also houses three computers that are internet connected.

Good individual planning and collaborative planning by teachers and subject departments ensures that needs are met and identified. A perusal of subject plans revealed a range of references to planning for students with identified needs in the mainstream subject classroom. This provision is laudable. A register of students in receipt of support is being maintained. It is good to see that some retesting of students is undertaken, with a view to determining individual progress in literacy and numeracy. The school engages with a range of agencies that support the school in its inclusion of and provision for students with additional educational needs, all of whom speak highly of the school.

The following are suggested as possible next steps for the school. To begin, it is suggested that the student register be developed a little further, so that it will serve to inform and guide staff in all their engagements with individual students. Additional information could include an outline of students’ learning styles and strengths, the progress made and when further progress will be reviewed, and by whom. Furthermore, such a register would assist in tracking the cumulative effect of certain delivery models, such as team-teaching, upon the overall additional hours allocated. Secondly, to further promote and sustain a collaborative and whole-school response, it would be good if the findings from re-testing, along with other student gains, were appropriately shared with colleagues.

The school has a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). It is good that a teacher has attended in-service in the area of EAL. It is suggested that time might be allocated at a future staff meeting for this teacher to provide relevant information to the whole staff. The school’s awareness of the key publication of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) entitled *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School*, is an equally positive finding. A further publication which may be of interest to all teachers dealing with bilingual students is *Learning in 2+ Languages* which is available at [www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk). Additional material on this area may also be accessed at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) in the inclusion section of the web site. Signs are displayed around the
school in students’ home languages, and a number of other initiatives also exist which seek to celebrate the intercultural nature of the school community.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

One of the strengths of the guidance provision in the school is that a wide range of staff, both formally and informally, is involved in the delivery of guidance and support. The guidance department plays a significant role in relation to the following key areas: students’ transition from primary to secondary; enrolment; induction; aptitude testing; subject and programme choice; career choice; and, as required, referrals to outside agencies.

The school’s guidance allocation is being put to very good and very full use in terms of providing personal, educational and vocational guidance for all students. Structured guidance programmes are delivered to all students, supported by a satisfactory level of contact with all class groups. As required, students also have access to individual counselling. This seeks to support students who may be experiencing personal, social or behavioural problems. Furthermore, the school employs a psychotherapist on an annual basis to work with students in need of additional guidance and support. The school houses a well-developed and appropriately equipped guidance suite and the school library also accommodates a careers reference section. This, together with the provision of the necessary ICT equipment, facilitates an ease of access for students to data relevant to their careers and further education options. The provision of this facility is very positive, as it promotes students’ independent research and learning. It is positive that work has been initiated in relation to the development of a whole-school guidance plan. It is suggested however that this work be re-prioritised in the school, as it will provide for the comprehensive documentation of the measures, structures and procedures that unite to provide a whole-school approach to guidance and care.

The school’s support for and care of its students is, undeniably, one of its most significant strengths. There exists a number of identifiable features of school organisation which support a whole-school approach to the support and care of students. This includes weekly and monthly meetings, the year-head and class-tutor structures, and personnel such as the school’s guidance counsellor and the home, school and community liaison (HSCL) teacher. The creation of the latter role and its inclusion in the school’s post structure for the last ten years indicates the emphasis and importance that the school places on guidance, support and care. The weekly meetings facilitate open communication amongst the individuals who are directly charged with the task of student care. These meetings also allow for the careful monitoring of students’ development, participation and progress. The communication of information relating to individual students is supported through the organisation of regular, monthly year-group meetings, which are focused on students’ all-round personal, social and academic progress. These are attended by the year head and the relevant class tutors, and facilitate the efficient and effective communication of key information to class tutors and in turn, and as required, to subject teachers. The class tutors and year heads who are, in effect, at the front line, make a very significant contribution in terms of the provision of support and care and in the identification of ‘at-risk’ students. Their commitment to this aspect of their work is duly noted and applauded, as is their obvious concern for the students to whom they have been assigned. The HSCL teacher plays a pivotal role in terms of forging, fostering and maintaining communication with parents. The levels of parental interest and engagement that this support structure fosters, in particular in instances where it is most needed, could not be as effectively addressed in the school by any other means. It must be said that a genuinely interested board and a very hands-on principal should also be identified as features of school organisation which support a whole-school approach to support and care. Furthermore, in the observation of teachers’ interactions with students, both in the classrooms and along the corridors, it is clear that the support of and care for all students is central to the work of every staff
member. This, in essence could be described as the backbone of the school’s approach to student support and care. The quality of the informal exchanges that take place among members of staff is another factor in the success of the school’s whole-school approach to students’ support and care. There is a very notable consciousness towards and recognition of ‘at-risk’ students in the school, and of the need to “mind” these students. The guidance counsellor works closely with the principal in this area. Students supporting students is another mindset that is fostered in the school. This is emphasised at assemblies where a strong emphasis is placed on the need for students to look out for one another, to care for one another and to seek help if required. The students’ council is also heavily involved in the provision of a peer-mentoring programme for incoming first-year students.

A rejuvenation of the school’s provision for SPHE, based on the principles of best practice, would make a significant contribution to the school’s provision for the holistic education of its student cohort and the inter-related aspects of support and care. The SPHE Support Service may be able to assist the school in this task. In addition, published subject inspection reports relating to SPHE could also inform in this regard. These are available at www.education.ie.

The spiritual care of students is also well provided for in St Mary’s. In addition to timetabled Religion classes, events to mark the liturgical calendar are organised on a regular basis. This includes Masses, penitential services and carol services. Class group retreats are also organised. Provision has also been made in the school building for a very beautiful prayer space.

Other valuable supports offered to and provided for students in St Mary’s Secondary School include supervised study, which is organised on a number of evenings each week, and a book-rental scheme.

Students’ progress is recognised on a continuous basis and by a number of means. The corridors are rich with displays acknowledging students’ participation and achievement over the years. In addition, during the evaluation, it was very apparent from the way in which the principal, deputy principal and teaching staff took the time to stop and speak with students, often commending them for notable achievements, as well as less notable but equally significant improvements. Furthermore, the school’s intercom is used to formally recognise students’ participation and achievement on a whole-school level, as is the screen at reception. The school also hosts an annual awards night, where recognition is wide-ranging and therefore very inclusive. The awards presented to students seek to acknowledge not only academic and sporting achievements, but also their personal accomplishments. Moreover, the school’s practice of seeking to promote students’ self-esteem and their sense of belonging by acknowledging at these awards students’ engagement and participation, as well as achievements, is particularly applauded.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- It is clear that all the partners, namely the members of the board, the senior management team, the staff, and the members of the parents’ association, work together, and in a very committed fashion, for the good of the students.
- The board of management of St Mary’s Secondary School, which was found to be functioning very effectively, demonstrates commitment to and a clear interest and involvement in the operation and performance of the school.
• The senior management team and the board of management possess a shared vision. This supports a team approach to the overall management of the school.
• The principal and deputy principal, who are equally committed to the school, demonstrate a very strong working relationship.
• The senior management team’s approach to leadership is transformational in nature.
• Both post-holders and non-post-holders are empowered by management to contribute, in a very real sense, to the smooth operation of the school.
• The school welcomes all students.
• Parents and students are facilitated by management to play a formal role in the life of the school.
• General deployment of teachers is satisfactorily used to achieve the academic and pastoral aims of the school.
• The school building, which is very well developed, provides very good quality facilities.
• School development planning has been fully embraced by all school partners and planning documentation indicates that the school has witnessed much positive change since the introduction of this planning process.
• A very good standard of subject-department planning is evident.
• Students are offered an impressive range and number of programmes and subjects.
• The TY and LCVP programmes are effectively co-ordinated, with every effort being made to provide students with a high quality educational experience.
• School systems and procedures seek to maximise students’ choice in relation to available subjects and programmes, whilst also providing much guidance and support.
• The level of provision for co-curricular and extracurricular activities is very good.
• Based on the findings of the five subject inspections completed, the overall quality of teaching and learning in St Mary’s Secondary School is very good.
• The quality of supports for the inclusion of students with additional educational needs is of a high standard.
• A wide range of staff is involved in the delivery of guidance and support, while the school’s guidance allocation is being put to very good and very full use in terms of providing personal, educational and vocational guidance for students.
• The school’s support for and care of its students is, undeniably, one of its most significant strengths.
• The school seeks to promote students’ self-esteem and their sense of belonging by acknowledging students’ engagement and participation, as well as their achievements.

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

• The board is encouraged in its intentions to advance and progress the development of the remaining three legally required policies.
• It is recommended that the whole-staff meet to discuss the school’s needs and the extent to which the needs are being met by the current post structure.
• It is recommended that the school revisits timetabling arrangements for Physical Education, with a view to providing all students with timetabled provision in the subject in line with Department of Education and Science guidelines.
• The intention to develop a whole-school guidance plan should be re-prioritised in the school.
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 English – 23 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of French – 19 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of History – 5 November 2008
- Subject Inspection of Science and Chemistry – 22 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs – 22 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 St. Mary’s Secondary School, Charleville welcomes the very positive whole school evaluation report and would like to acknowledge the professionalism and support of the reporting inspector and inspectorate team in carrying out the whole school evaluation.

The Board of Management would also like to acknowledge the dedication, commitment and professionalism of the teaching staff, students, parents, secretarial, caretaking and cleaning staff who work consistently to maintain and promote such high standards as evidenced in the whole school evaluation report.

The whole school evaluation was a very positive experience and the school community as a whole feel very affirmed by the very thorough and accurate description of life in St. Mary’s Secondary School, Charleville.

We welcome the very many strengths identified by the whole school evaluation team and we strive to continually build on these strengths into the future.

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 acknowledges the recommendations made in this report and taking constraints into account will strive to implement them into the future.

- Planning is underway to ensure full provision is made for PE to all students
- Drawing up of the remaining 3 legally required policies is a priority this year for all the stakeholders as is the re-prioritisation of the whole school guidance plan.
- With the lifting of the ASTI directive the school is now in a position to look at post structure to minimize the negative impact of the moratorium on posts.