Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire agus Íde
Newcastle West, County Limerick
Roll number: 64170L

Date of inspection: 26 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Scoil Mhuire agus Íde was undertaken in March 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects were evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

INTRODUCTION

Scoil Mhuire agus Íde, a Catholic, co-educational voluntary secondary school, was formed in 1992 by the amalgamation of Scoil Mhuire, a post-primary school for girls run by the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, and St Ita’s, a post-primary school for boys under unitary management. The school is centrally located in west County Limerick and is one of two post-primary schools in the town of Newcastle West, which is, other than Limerick city, the largest town in the county. At the time of the rationalisation of educational provision in the town, Comhairle Mhaonaiseoil Mhuire agus Íde Teoranta, a private limited company comprising members of the local community, was formed with the aim of advancing the plan for the school. An early form of public-private partnership was used in its establishment. The care taken in the design of the building and of the school grounds has necessitated little alteration of the original plan other than changes needed to accommodate students at the point of highest enrolment. Although the school buildings were designed to cater for five hundred and fifty students, enrolment is now relatively stable at over four hundred students.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school has a clear mission and vision that are shared by staff and management. Education in the Christian tradition, personal achievement, academic excellence, lifelong learning and a caring environment are among the stated objectives. The school is inclusive, catering for the educational needs of all enrolled students. There was significant evidence of the commitment of staff to the care, support and achievement of students, and which was also articulated in the interactions with all members of the school community in the course of the evaluation. The values that underpin the school’s mission inspire those involved in the management of the school and determine the activities of the school.

Extensive preparations were made for the amalgamation of the two schools, which included the management of staff interactions prior to and following the amalgamation. A smooth transition was achieved and the good relationships established in the course of the transition became the norm for the school in the subsequent years. The successful outcomes of the preparations are still tangible. Very good relationships have been established at all levels and among all groups involved in the day-to-day activities and in the managerial activities of the school. Similarly, relationships with external organisations and with the community are positive and reflect the board’s basis in the community. An atmosphere has been established among students, management and staff in which communication is ongoing and open. This environment has facilitated the development of policies and procedures that are balanced and fair, having had inputs from students, parents and staff as appropriate. The
school’s ethos serves extensively as an introductory statement to policy documents. This is appropriate.

It is significant that the school’s prospectus shows a strong commitment to discipline as a form of moral guidance rather than as a set of punitive measures. This is in keeping with the school’s mission and the current interest among the school community in promoting responsible behaviour through affirmative action.

1.2 School ownership and management

The school is owned by Comhairle Meánscoil Mhuire agus Íde Teoranta who also act as trustees of the school. The board of management is composed of three nominees of the trustees, two nominees of parents, two nominees of teaching staff and a nominee of the Bishop of Limerick. In the process of the school’s legal formation, a decision was made by the trustees to offer one of their nominations, originally four, to the Bishop. This was accepted and continues to be the case. The board of management is appropriately constituted and, on average, meets six times during the school year. Meetings are structured and are attended by the principal, as secretary. In order to enhance current good practice in informal communication, it is recommended that the board agree a formal summary of the business of each meeting to facilitate a common approach to informing the nominating bodies. Similarly, the board should also circulate, on the school’s website, for example, an annual report to parents reviewing the significant events of the year. This report would help to formalise the link between the board and parents council in the spirit of Section 20 of the Education Act 1998.

The board is active and committed to its management role under legislation. All board members have participated in training programmes for their roles provided by their trade union or by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB). The board’s support for the principal and deputy principal is enhanced by the positive rapport that was observed at all times during the evaluation. Support and advice is also provided by a sub-committee of the board which oversees the school’s finances. Similarly, the rapport that exists among board members has facilitated the development of policies, in collaboration with the partners in the school, which are appropriate, clear and well presented.

Recent issues discussed by the board include the possibility of broadening the range of subjects offered, the development of a modern library and possible solutions to the traffic congestion at the school gates. Two priorities have been identified by the board; the introduction of Materials Technology (Wood) as a lower-secondary cycle subject and the development of the library. Both these priorities are at an advanced stage of planning under management direction. The board’s engagement with and commitment to the development of the school’s curricular and physical environment is exemplified by these priorities.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal lead the school in a manner that is effective, collaborative and firmly based on the philosophy of education expressed in the school’s mission statement. Fundamental to the approach of senior management is a strong commitment to the values of good relationships, active support for students and staff, and the efficient integration of formal and informal systems of communication. The durability of management structures is demonstrated by the effective manner in which recent changes have been managed and absorbed. These include the appointment in 2009 of a new deputy principal, the retirement of five senior members of staff, three of whom held assistant principalships and two of whom were special-duties teachers.
Middle-management roles and responsibilities have been well distributed among staff. Ongoing, effective communication among staff enables rapid sharing of information. It also facilitates staff collaboration in the organisation of school events, supports for colleagues and students, and in the identification and prioritisation of current issues. Middle-management responsibilities are reviewed on an ongoing basis in accordance with the identified needs of the school. The tasks undertaken by those with management responsibilities are well balanced and appropriate. Most staff members have taken on responsibilities that contribute to the effectiveness of the educational provision for students. This positive input by staff is reciprocated by senior management and the board by its encouragement and facilitation of staff’s continuing professional development (CPD). The consequent expertise of staff members is a valuable asset to the school and was observed to be of benefit to student learning and care.

Students participate appropriately in the school’s decision-making process. The student council has been in existence since the formation of the school and is composed of the prefects of all classes up to and including Transition Year (TY), five representatives elected by fifth-year students and five elected by sixth-year students. Meetings are minuted and are attended by a teacher co-ordinator. Junior cycle students attend approximately fifty percent of meetings of the general student council. It is recommended that, in the interests of democracy and inclusion, all students should be represented at meetings. Studentcouncil.ie is a source of useful information regarding the formation of, and the principles underlying student councils. The information is available in the Second-level Support Service (SLSS) page of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) website. In addition, developmental issues prioritised by the students’ council should be considered collaboratively with staff. Such participation ensures a developmental link for students not only personally but also with subjects such as Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

The parents’ council was formed at the school’s inception and had been re-formed in the recent past following a lapse in the mid 2000s. While the council was relatively unstructured at the time of the evaluation, the appointment of a chairperson and affiliation with a national parents’ organisation were under consideration. Such structure is recommended. The annual report of the board of management to parents would consolidate the role of the parents’ council by bringing issues to its attention for consideration, and with a view to further dialogue. It is suggested that an agreed summary of the proceedings of board meetings should add to ongoing communication through parents’ nominees to the board. Members of the council were aware of the day-to-day business of the school and of the development plans of the board of management. The parents’ council was highly supportive of senior management and expressed interest in providing additional support through, for example, the arrangement of seminars on issues of topical interest to parents and students.

Clear documentation exists which shows the ongoing process of communication with, and information provision to parents. Letters to parents include guides to child protection and procedures in the case of swine flu, advice regarding examinations and invitations to parent-teacher meetings and presentations regarding educational decision-making. An audit of the code of behaviour has been initiated by senior management and it is clear that parents, students and the board have been engaged in this process.

1.4 Management of resources

The school staff comprises thirty-one teachers and seven additional staff members, including a school secretary, a caretaker, cleaning staff and two special needs assistants (SNAs). Staff are well-supported by management. It is indicative of the school’s interest in
the provision of a learning environment for all that it facilitates the placement of students of various programmes in the institutions of further and higher education and training.

Managing the school curriculum is an ongoing priority of the board, including recruiting the highest quality teaching staff and the filling of vacant assistant-principal and special-duty posts. The board has also considered the qualifications and specialisms of teachers in light of the implementation of the Teaching Council’s regulations and of the future needs of the school. The board should conduct an audit of the current needs of the school so that the specialisms and qualifications of teachers can be most efficiently used to meet those needs.

The school is accommodated in well-planned buildings on land donated by the Mercy Congregation. The thoughtful design has necessitated little change and relatively minimal maintenance since their construction. The variety of versatile spaces such as a lecture theatre, social spaces, and rooms with foldable partitions in addition to specialist rooms for, for example, Science, Home Economics, and Design and Communication Graphics enhance the school’s accommodation. The only major change to the original design involved the division of the library into two classrooms at a time when more than six hundred students were enrolled. This is now in the course of reversal, with active plans to restore the space as a library to modern specifications. A playing pitch of almost full size is part of the school grounds and is extensively used, as outlined in the report on Physical Education which forms part of this report.

Senior management has sought to ensure that information and communication technology (ICT) is current and is provided, as funds become available. To this end, data projectors have been prioritised for installation where appropriate. A suite of computers and associated software has been installed under the Department’s t4 Technology Support Service and a network of computers has been installed throughout the building in support of teaching and learning and to facilitate teachers’ administrative tasks. It is recommended that the e-Learning Plan section of the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) website be consulted in furtherance of this development. The school has a website designed and managed by an external agency. It is currently under reconstruction and it is recommended that the site be updated regularly to ensure that information is current and that the school is presented to its advantage. The development of the website also provides opportunities for the creation of pages devoted to, for example, the student council and to the board’s annual report to parents.

From the wording of a letter of 13 August 2009 to parents, it may be construed that sums payable to the school to provide for legitimate expenses are a form of compulsory school fee. Sums of €80, €150 and €230 are linked to the enrolment of one, two and three students respectively. It is recommended that the nature of the requested contributions be more clearly stated in the context of the school’s need for the voluntary support of parents to meet the expenses listed in the letter.

A safety audit has been carried out by an external agency and a health and safety statement is drawn up. Issues related to health and safety are closely monitored and documented. The principal is the safety officer and maintains a health and safety file that is current and appropriate. It is suggested that a small team be formed to organise regular health and safety checks and to record and report its findings as appropriate.

The school environment is well maintained and decorated. Staff members with responsibility for maintenance, cleaning and general upkeep are included in the activities of the school and are consulted as appropriate. The students’ council has prioritised health promotion and is currently seeking means by which consciousness of the issues may be raised and advanced. It is recommended that the issues be investigated in collaboration with the staff referred to above. The Health Service Executive and Green Schools programme
provide useful resources in this regard and may be consulted at www.healthpromotion.ie and www.greenschoolsireland.org.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The planning process is well established at Scoil Mhuire agus Íde and is based firmly on the school’s founding principles. This has had an integrating effect on the development of policies and practices. These include policies on admissions, the additional needs of students, bullying and internet use. The resources of the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and its suggested processes have been used productively to advance planning to a high level. It is significant that the school’s mission has been at the core of the process and is given prominence in its comprehensive documentation. The transfer of responsibility for the co-ordination of school development planning from the deputy principal, who had this responsibility prior to appointment, to a member of staff has been smooth and is ongoing. It is clear that the plan continues to be developed and that the roles of parents and students in its formation are being expanded with the encouragement of the board of management. This is good practice and is in keeping with the roles envisaged in the Education Act 1998. The inclusion of the date of ratification by the board and the proposed date for review, observed in some of the policies, is good practice and is recommended for all policies.

A subject-department structure is a core feature of good planning practice in the school. Responsibility has been devolved to subject departments for subject development. Good practice was observed in subject-department plans where, in addition to resource lists, short-term planning and expected outcomes, reference was made to learning goals, teaching methods, cross-curricular links and the availability of supports for students. These features of planning, among others, have advanced planning to a high level. Consideration should be given to these issues by all subject departments in the context of the recommended focus on learning and teaching, in the context of ongoing cross-curricular collaboration, and in the context of the clear commitment of staff to self-review. Such self-review is ongoing and is reflected in the positive actions of staff and management following the recommendations of previous inspections. Subject-department planning has been advanced to the level at which, with the appropriate structures now in place, the opening is provided for a professional focus on learning and teaching and their outcomes. The school is also well placed for professional development in this regard by the presence on the staff of members who display high levels of competence in teaching practice, including staff who participate as subject experts and trainers in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The formation of a task groups to advance the school’s engagement with learning and teaching is recommended.

The development of policy documents, such as the anti-bullying policy, has been informed by students. The relevant documents were presented for consideration by the student council and the outcomes of deliberations were integrated with the inputs of the other partners in the policies. A considerable body of information was gathered from students in the course of a recent analysis of the needs of the school, initiated by the board of management and reflected a similar process among staff. It is clear from the responses to the review that staff and students have opportunities to express opinions regarding the day-to-day issues such as discipline, school maintenance and attendance. Such good practice is indicative of the approach of school management to planning and policy review in general. In consequence, systems are in place that allow these issues to be managed satisfactorily. Attendance, for example, is continually monitored by a combination of roll calls, electronic checking and early contact with parents, where appropriate. Although elements of the
The attendance strategy are alluded to in, for example, the pastoral care policy and the student journal, it is recommended that these references be collated into a unified attendance-strategy document as outlined in Section 20 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

The roles and responsibilities of staff have become issues following recent staff changes, including the retirement of senior staff and of staff with middle-management responsibilities. The school review, to which allusion has been made, provides some information by which progress may be guided. Having established the school’s needs, it is recommended that the roles and responsibilities of those whose function it will be to attend to those needs be prioritised and clarified.

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), the principal, and a deputy DLP, the deputy principal, have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The range of subjects and programmes available to students is appropriate to a school of its size and location. Students are encouraged to engage with subjects at the highest possible level and the timetable is arranged so that this is possible through subject setting. A suitably broad view is taken by teachers and subject departments in the delivery of the curriculum. Positive comments were made by inspectors regarding the range of learning experiences afforded by this broad and balanced approach and regarding the creativity of teachers in its delivery.

The programmes being offered include the Junior Certificate, the Leaving Certificate established, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and an optional TY. The LCA is offered each year and is provided when a sufficient number of students indicate an interest in participating. The LCA was not provided during the current year due to an insufficient number of applicants. From year to year, school management ensures the continued provision of this valuable programme. Some shortfall in the provision of Physical Education (PE) at senior level was observed and this issue should be addressed for future years.

The TY programme and LCVP are well planned and organised. The programmes are well balanced between curricular inputs and co-curricular inputs, arranged in co-operation with local and regional organisations and individuals. At the time of the evaluation, for example, TY students were engaged in an entertaining and informative programme of driver education organised by teachers with the co-operation of a large car manufacturer. The significant co-operation of local businesses is evident in the very well organised and documented work-experience programme for TY and LCVP. The documentation includes a comprehensive suite of letters to parents and employers that are used prior to, during and after the period of work experience.

The board of management is active in its consideration of the curricular needs of students. The board recently introduced Design and Communication Graphics as a senior cycle
subject and is working towards the introduction of Materials Technology (Wood) in the junior cycle. The advancement of this plan and of the board’s plan for the reinstatement of the school library is recommended.

Staff timetables indicate working hours and tuition time in keeping with Department regulations and the school calendar indicates provision for 167 instruction days per year.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

The school’s approach to the provision of optional subjects and programmes is reflective and operates in the context of the efforts by senior management to maximise the availability of a wide range of subjects both to senior students and to those entering the school for the first time. The range and organisation of subjects, based on students’ expressed preferences, enables their equitable uptake by girls and boys. Optional subjects are chosen by students following a process of information-giving to students and parents, and subject experiences, particularly at senior level. Consideration has been given to various methods of enabling subject choice for the Junior Certificate examination. Currently, some subjects are chosen prior to entry to the school.

While little evidence was found that the current system of subject choice had had an adverse effect on the subjects subsequently chosen by students for the certificate examinations, some evidence was found which showed that the system had a periodic influence on subject uptake in the junior cycle. A DVD sent to all schools by the Department, eQuality Measures (2009), and publications by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), support the value of subject choice following the experience of subjects. It is recommended that further consideration be given to the development of a system whereby students’ Junior Certificate optional subjects are chosen following some experience of those subjects.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

The activities organised at the time of the evaluation are indicative of the wide range and high quality of co-curricular and extracurricular provision. In common with the planning and delivery of subjects, staff collaboration was strongly evident in the planning and execution of the activities organised. Documentation of the planned activities was of a very high calibre. Similar documents related to other activities, such as work experience, school events and outdoor pursuits, were also well formed and comprehensive.

Many of the events involved extensive participation by students. Large numbers of students also participate in a spectrum of sporting activities arranged mainly after lesson times. These, and other events during lunchtimes, ensure that the interests of the majority of students are catered for at some time during the school year. The participation and success of students in sporting, artistic and academic competitions attests to the continuing importance of such activities to the life of the school and to the participation of staff, students, parents and the community in their organisation.

It was clear that planning was collaborative, not only within subject departments but also across the curriculum and in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. This was exemplified by a number of successful events that had been organised for students at the time of the evaluation in which the participation of staff from a number of disciplines was evident.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS
4.1 Planning and preparation

The positive attitudes to structured planning in the school have had concomitantly positive effects on planning for teaching and learning. Inspectors encountered a culture in which formal structures supported by senior management, such as subject departments and policies, provided a firm foundation on which planning for individual lessons was based. In all cases, lessons were well prepared and planned. In a number of subject plans, there was evidence that learning outcomes had been elucidated and developed as an effective focus for subject planning. These developments are in keeping with the recommended focus on teaching and learning.

Well-structured subject-department planning facilitates the development of common subject plans and programmes of work. The support of colleagues enables a consultative approach to the use of resources, including ICT, the breadth and balance of material covered and the exploration of possibilities for the development of the subjects. These include professional matters such as modes of assessment to be used during lessons and in end-of-term examinations, cross-curricular links with other subjects and the use of teaching strategies that facilitate the inclusion of students with additional educational needs.

Subject-department planning also encompassed safety issues that were both subject specific and related to general safety within the school. Teachers are clearly well poised for the structured development of planning into the realm of learning and teaching recommended elsewhere in this report. Much expertise in this regard was observed in the course of lessons and was evident in meetings with staff.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Learning and teaching were of high quality in the majority of lessons observed. The teaching methods used were varied, stimulating, well structured and effective. The good relationships that existed between students and teachers were central to the affirmative atmosphere created in classrooms. Teachers demonstrated an awareness of students as individuals in the group setting, which enabled the development of more flexible responses to the needs of students. Approaches adopted by teachers included active teaching methods, the use of local and topical knowledge and a good-humour used productively in classroom management and in the creation of an environment conducive to learning and free of disciplinary interruptions. A good example of the school’s initiative in encouraging the use of active and experiential teaching methods is a resource pack, specifically developed for teachers of SPHE but available to and promoted for use by all teachers. This is good practice. It is the more noteworthy for having emerged from an area of the curriculum that is more personally than academically oriented, reiterating the relationship between the school’s mission of care and good teaching.

The majority of lessons were stimulating, well focused on the subject matter and included a variety of teaching methods. Resources such as worksheets, audio-visual aids, ICT and the creative use of a variety of other objects were effective in maintaining students’ attention. The chosen methodologies engaged with different learning styles and contributed to the positive direction and management of lessons. Of particular note was the print-rich environment in many classrooms. Learning intentions were frequently shared with students at the outset of lessons. Where, in a minority of lessons, a clear focus based on explicit aims and objectives was not apparent, inspectors recommended greater clarity. The sharing of experiences with colleagues was also recommended. Good practice observed included clear routines, such as roll calls and announcements, to allow students to settle before the commencement of lessons, recapitulation of previous lessons and the summarisation of lesson content. Topics were generally contextualised either by links made during lessons or by summaries provided in the course of the school year. It was clear from students’ work
that, where there was some focus on a subject’s syllabus, it was appropriate to the year group and not overly reliant on the textbook.

Students showed an interest in the content of lessons and a good understanding not only of current topics but also of their relationship with the content of previous lessons. Students responded well to a range of questions and of types of question posed by teachers. Effective learning was also displayed by the work of students examined in copybooks, role-plays and in various displays of work observed in classrooms and throughout the school. Further confirmation of the high level of students’ learning was evident in their obvious enthusiasm and competency in the course of co-curricular activities and by their satisfaction with the quality of teaching in the school, articulated at the time of the evaluation.

The invitations accepted by inspectors to observe a number co-curricular events support the general finding that effective teaching and learning are ongoing at Scoil Mhuire agus Íde. It was clear on those occasions that students were engaged, that teachers were enthusiastic about their subjects, confirming the school’s capacity to reflect on such good professional practice and to learn from it.

4.3 Assessment

It is clear that the range of assessment methods used by staff is broad and widely applied. This is in keeping with staff interest in the development of professional competencies in learning and teaching. It is noted that the existing competencies of staff further reflects the school’s readiness for engagement with issues in learning and teaching. Inspectors commented positively on, for example, the quality of homework assigned, its integration with the curricular components of subjects and the variety of approaches to its marking. Where improvement was suggested, it related to the more widespread use of the assessment modes and techniques commended. These included the use of annotated marking of copybooks, the development of peer assessment, of both homework and work during lessons, and self-assessment by students. The further investigation and development of techniques of formative assessment, such as those used in Assessment for Learning (AfL), are recommended.

Inspectors commented on the high quality of records of students’ progress, attendance and participation kept by individual staff members, some in easily accessible ICT formats. The productive use of the student journal to record comments of interest to and for the information of parents was also noted positively. These are complemented by annual parent-teacher meetings and the school’s openness to the discussion of students’ progress by appointment.

The formal assessment of students begins as part of the process of induction. Standardised assessment of general ability, literacy and numeracy is supported by more informal contacts with parents and with teachers in primary schools. This information is used in decision making about the allocation of resources to meet the needs of students particularly by the special educational needs department.

Formal assessment continues by means of in-school examinations before Christmas for all students, and before the summer holidays for students in first year, second year, TY and fifth year. In addition, fifth-year students sit in-class tests about the time of the October mid-term break and before Easter. Students studying for the certificate examinations sit pre-certificate examinations in the spring. Their parents receive reports of these examinations and also receive monthly reports of progress throughout the school year. The celebration of students’ achievements in all fields is formalised in the school’s annual awards ceremonies and in occasional letters and newsletters. These are enhanced by the participation, as appropriate, by students in their preparation and implementation.
Good practice was observed in the use of reasonable accommodations in the in-house examinations for those students for whom application had been made for similar accommodations in the certificate examinations. Similar good practice was observed in the use, where practicable, of common examinations across year groups.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

Structures are in place to ensure that the needs of students, including those with additional educational and personal needs, are identified, that the most efficient use is made of existing resources in attending to those needs and that the inclusive atmosphere of the school is maintained. To this end the special educational needs policy clearly outlines the roles of those involved and the preparations made for students entering the post-primary school. The additional educational needs department is co-ordinated by a qualified staff member who oversees the use of a total allocation of 3.77 whole-time equivalents (WTE) in the delivery of the programme. The allocation includes one WTE for English as an additional language and one for special needs assistants (SNA), currently shared by two incumbents. The remaining allocation is currently used by thirteen staff members.

Although this distribution favours the inclusion of a considerable proportion of staff and exemplifies the whole-school nature of support for students’ learning, it is suggested that a smaller, more specialised team would be appropriate in facilitating the development of expertise in the area of additional educational needs and in the methods best suited to addressing those needs. It is recommended that, in a planning environment at the heart of which is teaching and learning, such a smaller core team be formed with a view to increased expertise in catering for the additional needs of students. The Inspectorate publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs* (2007) should be referred to in this regard. The identification and early timetabling by management of staff to engage in this work is recommended in order that collaboration and preparation be facilitated.

The support systems for students are well integrated. Both the documentation and the practice are collaborative and show that strong formal and informal links exist between staff with student-support roles. The needs of students are determined through a process that includes visits by staff to the primary schools of students entering Scoil Mhuire agus Íde, consultations with parents and the use of psychometric tests in collaboration with the guidance department. Further diagnostic tests are administered to students provisionally identified as having additional needs. The documentation of the results of these assessments is of a high standard and is circulated to staff as confidentiality allows. The development of these records as an electronic register of the additional needs of students is recommended. Such a register may be in spreadsheet format and may include the names of the students in receipt of support, the identified needs, the teaching hours allocated, and the manner in which support is provided. It may also outline briefly the content of the support programme, the agreed learning goals and the learning outcomes achieved. It is recommended that, in addition to the menu of effective supports already available, such as work with individual students and with students in small groups, the development of team-teaching approaches be considered.

Similarly, the development of expertise in attending to the needs of students for whom English is an additional language is recommended for more general consideration by staff of all disciplines. Such approaches may be generic, across all subjects, or more specifically focused on language and literacy. In addition, the linguistic and personal expertise of staff may be called upon where, for example, a policy is implemented that recognises and
affirms the use of students’ home language. The PDST offers good advice and training to interested schools and should be consulted as part of this process of development. In making these recommendations, it is reiterated that teaching and learning are of high quality and that the school is well-poised to focus on the development of these strengths.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The value placed by the school on care is evident in the inclusion of care in its mission statement and by the prominent inclusion of pastoral care in the school prospectus. In many respects, the pastoral care structure and provision at Scoil Mhuire agus Íde comprises those elements of Guidance that are the responsibility of wider community of staff and is in keeping with the Inspectorate’s Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, Relating to Students’ Access to Appropriate Guidance (2005). As such, guidance provision is well integrated into the school’s procedures and practices, displaying the commitment of staff to its core values and to ensuring continuity in the face of change. Changes have included the temporary replacement of guidance personnel and the appointment of a staff member as deputy principal. Adjustment to these events has been successful. It is recommended that the review of wider roles and responsibilities in Guidance, which is a regular part of good planning practice, be undertaken in the light of these changes and in the light of the school’s commitment to maximising the supports available to students.

The facilities for Guidance are good and include access to ICT both for students and for classroom practice. Plans are well advanced for the full use of the ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills as outlined in the inspection report on the provision of Guidance associated with this evaluation. The existing programme of Guidance is well balanced and shows that collaboration is widespread among staff in the delivery of Guidance and in caring for students. Staff members are familiar with and utilise a range of possible interventions in support of students including work during lessons, interventions with individual students and referral to external agencies when appropriate. Guidance provision is well balanced between each of the year groups and between personal, educational and vocational guidance. Similarly, the balance of work with individual students, with groups of students and with staff is equitable.

Significant collaboration among staff in support of students is a feature of professional practice in the school and encompasses spiritual and moral development. In addition to Religious Education (RE), liturgical celebrations, particularly in the Catholic tradition, are a feature of the life of the school. These are a regular feature of the school calendar and are often celebrated with the assistance of the local parish. In addition, the parish and other supportive organisations are part of the school’s procedures for addressing crises. The professionalism of staff has facilitated the integration of new staff members and the involvement of parents and of the external community in the system of supports. The development of collaborative roles for students and parents in reviewing the needs of the school and in planning the means of attending to those needs is ongoing and is facilitated by the size of the school, its management and the positive relationships that exist there.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teaching and learning are of a high quality.
- The school has engaged effectively with the process of school development planning and is appropriately placed to engage fully with teaching and learning as professional planning priorities.
• Documentation of policies, processes and plans is clear and well presented.
• The board of management is trained, committed and actively supportive of senior management and staff.
• Parents and students have been involved in the review and development of policies as appropriate.
• Leadership at senior management level is collaborative and effective.
• Middle management has been devolved appropriately and successfully to staff.
• Although there have been significant changes in staffing, their effects on outcomes for students have been successfully managed.
• Continuing professional development of staff is encouraged and facilitated. High levels of professional expertise among staff are in evidence.
• A strong commitment to the school’s mission of care of students and of staff is clearly evident.
• Supports for students include learning, personal, educational and vocational supports.
• Communication is good at all levels in the school and is an effective blend of the informal and the formal abased on good relationships.
• The development of ICT is ongoing and is among the priorities of management and staff, particularly as an enhancement of teaching methods.
• Clear and effective responses have been made to the recommendations of previous subject inspections.
• The school’s facilities are very well maintained.
• Students have opportunities to engage in a wide range of curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities and programmes.
• The local community is supportive of the school at all levels.

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

• It is recommended that a task group should be formed in the context of school development planning to advance the school’s engagement with teaching and learning as a professional focus.
• It is recommended that a core team be formed with a view to increased expertise in catering for the additional needs of students, including their language needs, so that such expertise is available to staff of all disciplines.
• Current roles and responsibilities in relation to meeting the needs of the school should be reviewed to ensure the most efficient use is made of available resources in teaching and in middle management.
• The voluntary nature of contributions requested of parents should be clearly stated.
• Developmental issues prioritised by the students’ council should be considered collaboratively with staff.
• The board’s plan for the reinstatement of the school library should be advanced.
• It is recommended that further consideration be given to the development of a system whereby students’ Junior Certificate optional subjects are chosen following some experience of those subjects.

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 – 26 March 2010
- Subject Inspection of Guidance – 3 December 2009
- Subject Inspection of Home Economics – 25 March 2010
- Subject Inspection of Physical Education – 24 March 2010