An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Gerald’s College
Castlebar, County Mayo
Roll number: 64580H

Date of inspection: 22 January 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St. Gerald’s College was undertaken in January 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 in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

St. Gerald’s College is an all boys’ Catholic secondary school founded in 1909 by the De La Salle Brothers. The original college was located in what is now St. Gerald’s Parish Centre, Chapel Street and in its first year it had an enrolment of twenty-four students. In 1971 the present college on the Newport Road was opened, built solely from funds provided by the De La Salle Order. Whilst trusteeship of the school has transferred to Le Chéile the De La Salle order continues to maintain a strong interest in the school and their support across various areas of school life is highly valued by staff and management. The first lay principal was appointed in 2000.

The school has very good facilities due to the ongoing programme of development and refurbishment undertaken by the board of management and senior management. At present the school caters for 590 students from a catchment area which includes the town of Castlebar and its rural surrounds. The student population includes students from a wide range of abilities, socio-economic groups and cultural backgrounds.

This year celebrations were held to mark one hundred years of post-primary educational provision in St. Gerald’s College. The impressive publication *A Century of Memories, 1909 – 2009* provides an interesting and pictorial account of the history and development of the school, its student body and its many sporting achievements.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The mission statement of St. Gerald’s College as a Lasallian centre is to “give a human and Christian education to the young with special concern for the disadvantaged”. Nurturing the holistic development of the person in a climate of respect and care lies at the heart of the Lasallian ethos. There was clear evidence in the course of the evaluation that St. Gerald’s College is true to the vision expressed in its mission statement. The school is Catholic in ethos and places strong emphasis on the spiritual development of students through its Religious Education (RE) programme and other liturgical celebrations and events. The broad curriculum and diverse range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities offered within the school provide the opportunity for all students to develop their potential in accordance with their abilities and interests. Respect, for self and others, is the cornerstone of the school. This is reflected in the level of care extended to all and is implicit in the broad range of practices and policies that focus on providing a safe and caring working and learning environment.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted in accordance with the Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools. The board has significant levels of educational and leadership expertise among its members. Some members have served for
lengthy periods on the board and others have long-standing associations with the school. The board meets on a regular basis and this is further complemented by frequent contact between the principal and the chair of the board. The board communicates with the teaching staff through an agreed verbal report. In order to implement a more reliable reporting mechanism and to establish better communication channels with all the relevant partners it is recommended that an agreed written report is furnished to the parents and teaching staff. The board has appointed a sub-committee to oversee the financial affairs of the school. It is commendable that all board members have received training and are aware of their statutory roles and obligations.

The board has a very good knowledge of the school and takes an active role and interest in school affairs. During its current tenureship the board has acted as an effective bridge in the school’s transition from the De La Salle trusteeship to Le Chéile. Notwithstanding this transition the De La Salle order continues to strongly support the school through funding for school improvements and through the provision of leadership courses for principals and induction courses for teachers newly appointed to the staff. This level of continued interest and engagement with the school is appreciated by all.

At board meetings the principal’s report forms the main focus of discussions and issues commonly dealt with include discipline, refurbishment and matters pertaining to the continued development of the school. Consultation and consensus characterise decision-making procedures and in keeping with the key role of the board these decisions are taken in line with the ethos of the school as set out in the mission statement. The board also sees its role as supporting senior management in the maintenance of high standards across the key areas of school life.

The board is engaged in policy development and has ratified a broad range of policies including those required by legislation. The continuous professional development of teachers is a priority of the board. Funding is provided for membership of subject associations and the board favour the maximum attendance from departments at in-service training. Individual applications for funding for further studies are considered on a case-by-case basis. This is an example of good practice as it ensures that members of staff are up skilled.

The board takes an active role in staff recruitment and has been involved in the interviewing process for the appointment to posts of responsibility and the procurement of new staff.

It is the view of the board that the school offers a broad and balanced curriculum which meets the needs of all students. However given the diverse ability of the student body it is recommended that the board give due consideration to the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as a complementary senior cycle option. The school provides an extensive range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities for which the board strongly expressed appreciation. The board is commended for their support of and attendance at these activities.

The board is satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning in the school and commented positively on the outcome of the comparative analysis of student attainment in State examinations compared with national norms. It is the intention of the board to continue with this practice. As a further means of strengthening teaching and learning the board should oversee the development of a policy to ensure that the recommendations of subject inspection reports are implemented.

Current priorities for the board include ongoing policy formation and adoption, development of the canteen and new classrooms, expanding information and
communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, continued staff development and increasing supports for students with special educational needs. Members of the board referred to the challenge facing the school in meeting the changing needs of future students in an adequate manner.

The board is commended for its knowledge of the school and planning for its needs into the future.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal are an effective and dynamic leadership team and are committed and conscientious in their work. They work in a collaborative and complementary manner. Both the principal and the deputy principal had been valued members of the teaching staff for a number of years before their respective appointments in 2006 and 2009. Whilst the senior management team carries out an extensive range of clearly-defined roles they also discharge a number of shared duties on a daily basis which includes discipline and acting as class heads to Leaving Certificate students. The duties carried out by the senior management team should be reviewed and some of them appropriately devolved to middle-management level in order to build and enhance distributed and shared leadership.

The principal and deputy principal meet each morning and maintain a visible and supportive presence on the corridors and in the school yard. Senior management has an open and consultative management style which is characterised by a commitment to building good relationships with all school partners. Both are commendably involved in ongoing training for their respective roles and the deputy principal has engaged in considerable postgraduate studies and in-service activities.

The principal and deputy principal share a common and progressive vision for the continued development of the school across a number of key aspects of school life. It is commendable that the development of instructional leadership forms an integral part of this mutual vision and is representative of their commitment to providing a high quality education to all students in their care. It is recommended that this vision be documented and shared with all relevant partners and that the outcome of this consultation provides a framework for school development planning into the future. The co-operation and support of teaching staff and all stakeholders is essential to ensure the realisation of this collective vision.

The in-school management structure consists of six assistant principals and fourteen special duties teachers. In 2008 a whole-staff review of the post structure was conducted and whilst the needs of the school were identified some of the most important needs are not being addressed within the post structure. All post-holders are assigned class-head duties and some additional responsibilities are allocated to the assistant principals. It is recommended that the post structure be reviewed again according to the present key needs of the school. The board has a central role and responsibility in this process and in ensuring that duties assigned to post holders are carried out in full. This review should be conducted in line with Circular PPT 29/02 and facilitate the more optimal deployment of personnel in central areas of school life including “instructional leadership, curriculum development, the management of staff and their development and the academic and pastoral development of the school.” In this regard it is recommended that a more resource-efficient, year-head system replace the current class-head system and that co-ordinators of school planning, special educational needs, English as an additional language (EAL) and an ICT systems administrator should be included in the new post duties. This development will also serve to broaden the range of experience of existing post-holders. The duties should also have a level of responsibility and workload commensurate with the category of post. In this regard the duties of the
Assistant principals should have a more substantial workload in line with Circular PPT 29/02. Following the reorganisation of the post structure regular meetings of the assistant principals with senior management should be facilitated given their envisaged pivotal roles at this level of management. This forum will also provide for collaborative leadership and the sharing of relevant information. In line with best practice and to strengthen co-operation, procedures should be put in place to allow for the structured reporting on the performance of duties to senior management on a term basis, followed by a yearly report to the board.

There is a variety of mechanisms in place to support communication with staff. Staff meetings occur on average once per term and there are regular short briefings given by the principal at break time. There are notice boards in the staff room and announcements on the public address system to facilitate the dissemination of information. The senior management team also meets with individual members of staff as is necessary and they operate an open-door policy in support of all staff.

There is good provision for all staff to avail of opportunities for CPD. Recently a number of staff have qualified in the area of special needs and currently one staff member is undertaking post-graduate studies in guidance and another in school planning. Information in relation to professional development courses is disseminated to teachers and they are facilitated in attending in-service. On return from in-service formalised structures should be put in place to facilitate the sharing of information and resources with all department members. All subject department and programme plans should outline the in-career development undertaken by teachers to assist in identifying further training needs that may be necessary and to ensure that there is equity in in-service participation. It is commendable that whole-staff inputs have been organised on a number of educational and social themes. It is encouraged that the pedagogical needs of teachers are surveyed in order to inform a calendar of CPD to support teaching and learning in the school.

The management of students in the school is facilitated by the school’s code of behaviour, the class-head system and a number of key supporting policies. During the course of the evaluation a well-disciplined and ordered atmosphere was evident in the school. The code of behaviour is clear, contains a rationale for rules, and explains the procedures involved in the event of breaches of discipline. The students commented favourably on the code as being “firm but fair”. A scaled system of dealing with misbehaviour paralleled by supportive pastoral interventions by class heads are in place thus encouraging students to amend their behaviour. Students who have been assigned suspension are supported after the incident and are put on report to encourage them to reflect on their behaviour. In view of the fact that the code is currently under review in line with the NEWB guidelines Developing a Code of Behaviour, Guidelines for Schools it may now be an opportune time to develop a more proportionate disciplinary structure to deal with breaches of school rules in relation to punctuality.

Student’ attendance is recorded in all classes on a daily basis. It is school policy that records of attendance are issued to the office in the morning and again in the afternoon by subject teachers. This is commended. However it was noted from school attendance records that there are issues regarding the furnishing of these records to the office for collation. To ensure the accurate recording of daily absences it is recommended that all teachers submit records for central compilation at the appointed time. An examination of attendance documentation also revealed that there are concerns in relation to repeated absenteeism by particular students in Transition Year and among EAL students. It is recommended that existing strategies outlined in the attendance policy be implemented and that further contextualised strategies be put in place to address this problem. In this regard the compulsory nature of TY should be reviewed as this programme may not suit the needs and interests of all students and thus may be impacting on student attendance. The performance
The school has an inclusive ethos and students from all backgrounds and all ability levels are welcome to attend the school. The wording of the admission’s policy should be amended to reflect the school’s open enrolment practices and to ensure that it fully complies with legislative requirements.

The school operates an open door policy in relation to communication with parents and this was confirmed by the parents’ council. The school has in place a variety of means to maintain contact with parents including newsletters, school calendar, website, letters, phone calls, students’ journal, school reports and SMS messages. Parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group in line with agreed procedures. Parents are welcome and are facilitated to meet with any teacher or senior management by making an appointment.

The parents’ council plays an important and effective role in the life of the school. In addition to engaging in a number of fund-raising projects to support school initiatives the parents’ council organises guest speakers on relevant themes and assists in school related public events. In order to strengthen the collaborative links between the parents and the school it is recommended that the parents’ council is more actively involved in the drawing up of school policies. Meetings of the parents’ council are held once per term. Strategies to enhance communication between the parents’ council and the general body of parents should be explored.

A student council was first established in the school in 1979. The current composition of the student council consists of elected representatives from fifth year and sixth year class groups. It is recommended that a more democratic system is put in place to include representatives from all year groups. It is suggested that student council elections at junior cycle could be undertaken as a CSPE action project. Information on this can be obtained from the publication Students Councils in Schools: A module of work for CSPE and from the website www.studentcouncil.ie.

Two formal meetings of the student council and the liaison teacher have occurred since the start of the academic year. Student members of the council have convened numerous informal meetings to discuss and progress issues. The student council has undertaken numerous fund-raising activities in support of a range of charities, causes and in-school activities. It has also been involved in the organisation of school events and has progressed issues of concern to students. Members of the council presented as articulate and capable young men who are committed to this work. Contact is maintained with the general student body by means of a dedicated notice board and announcements on the public address system by the principal. It is suggested that council members are provided with badges to enhance their profile among all students.

School management sees the student council as having an important role to play in the life of the school and a good relationship characterises their interaction. In maximising the role and potential of the student council members should receive training, a constitution should be developed, more formalised procedures for meetings should be put in place and the minutes of meetings should be recorded. The role of the student council in relation to policy formation and review should also be developed. In addition the role of the teacher facilitator should be documented in the student-council policy. Training for this role can be accessed through the Citizenship Education Support Team.
Good links have been established between the school and a wide range of bodies, employers, agencies, the past pupils’ association, educational providers and sports clubs in the local community. These links serve to enhance the educational experience of the students in St. Gerald’s.

1.4 Management of resources

St. Gerald’s College has a teaching allocation of 41.33 whole-time equivalent (WTE) teachers which includes the ex-quota positions of principal, deputy principal, learning support teacher and guidance counsellors. Two special needs assistants (SNAs) are employed by the school.

The ancillary staff makes a very effective contribution to the school. The secretarial staff plays a key role in the administration of the school’s daily business and the well kept building and grounds reflect the good work carried out by the care-taking and cleaning staff. The positive support that the ancillary staff provides to teachers, students and parents is commended and highly valued across the school community.

The majority of staff is deployed in accordance with their subject specialisms and qualifications in keeping with good practice. It is commendable that opportunities to teach subjects at the different examination levels and within the TY programme are facilitated by senior management. Continuity in syllabus delivery is supported by classes retaining the same subject teacher for the duration of cycles.

In addition to the time-tabled Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme seventy-five minutes are assigned to pastoral care /class head work each week. A pastoral care manual has been developed which outlines proposed weekly themes to be covered during this time. However the level and extent to which this programme is implemented by class heads is unclear. Evidence suggests that instead this time is used primarily to monitor and deal with attendance and punctuality. The material covered in, and the time allocated to, this non-curricular work should be reviewed to ensure that students receive twenty-eight hours of instruction per week in line with Circular letter M29/95. This review should result in further time being made available for curricular provision.

There is a good induction programme in place to support teachers new to the school. A staff handbook containing some policies and other useful information has been developed. Further support is available to teachers through the provision of a two-day induction programme facilitated by the De La Salle Brothers.

The school building is in very good condition. There is a good range of well-equipped classrooms and specialist rooms. There has been on-going refurbishment and upgrading of the school’s accommodation over the years. The board and senior management are commended for their substantial engagement with planning to enhance the school’s facilities. The school extension completed in 2000 provided for extra general classrooms and a number of specialist rooms. More recently under the summer works scheme the school windows have been replaced, a new roof has been added to the science block and the school’s boilers have been converted to gas. Students have access to a canteen that serves a variety of food including hot meals. Currently senior management is progressing further improvement of the school’s facilities to include an extension to the canteen area and three new classrooms to replace the pre-fabricated ones.

The school has leased the sports hall located on its grounds from the De La Salle Past Pupils’ Association. This facility adequately meets the requirements for indoor sporting
facilities for the school. Good links have been forged with local sports’ clubs for the use of pitches.

The majority of teachers have base classrooms. This is commended as it facilitates the creation of a visually stimulating and print-rich learning environment which was evident in many rooms. It is encouraged that such an environment be developed in all rooms through the display of subject-specific charts, posters and students’ work. The display of photographs, awards and art work on the school corridors appropriately acknowledge and celebrate students’ achievements. These displays foster in students a strong sense of pride in the school and bear testimony to their many successes in a range of academic, co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

The school does not have a formal system of subject-based budgets. Requests for additional resources are facilitated by management on a case-by-case basis. It is evident from reports on some subjects inspected that there is a need for the provision of additional resources. In such cases future subject planning should focus on the acquisition of resources to further support teaching and learning.

The school has a very well developed ICT infrastructure which enables all subject departments and teachers to access ICT facilities. A laptop and data projector are available to all subject departments and it is the school’s aim to have all classrooms equipped with a laptop and projector by the end of the current school year. It is highly commended that the school has developed a virtual learning environment (VLE) and all staff has received training in Moodle. It is commended that the business blog has been named as a Scoilnet star site. There is evidence that some teachers are using ICT in their subject areas. However it is clear from the subject inspection reports that there is need for further integration of ICT to support teaching and learning. Each subject department should develop strategies to facilitate its members in meeting the challenge of integrating ICT into their classroom practice.

The school’s ICT policy outlines the development of ICT within the school and all students and staff are required to sign an acceptable use policy. The school’s system administrator maintains the ICT infrastructure and develops and promotes an ICT culture in the school. This work is highly commended and it is recommended that it be represented in the post structure.

The school has a health and safety statement which needs to be reviewed and updated. The Review of Occupational Health and Safety in the Technologies in Post-Primary Schools should be used to inform this review. A detailed hazard analysis and risk assessment of all areas of the school should be included in this review and the results should be documented. In undertaking this work the school’s health and safety representative should consult with management and subject teachers as the overall health and safety statement of the school should include input from every subject department. Once ratified by the board this policy should be updated annually. Fire drills take place on a regular basis and evacuation procedures are posted in all classrooms. This is good practice. It is suggested that a list of personnel with training in first aid and a list of contact numbers for the emergency services be displayed in the staff room and the office. The role and responsibility of safety officer should be assumed by the principal.

The school has earned a Green Flag award and there was a noticeable absence of litter throughout the school building and grounds. A system of recycling is well-established in the school. Staff and students are commended for their commitment to promoting environmental awareness and creating a pleasant school environment.
2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

Formal school development planning and subject department planning commenced in 2006. Over the past three years policy development has been a major focus of the planning process and has culminated in a significant number of policies being formally ratified in 2009. At present a further range of policies are in the process of being drafted. The school is also aware of the need to periodically review polices and the code of behaviour and RSE policy are currently under review. The extensive engagement with policy development is commended and is indicative of the school’s commitment to the planning process at whole-school level. Particularly praiseworthy is the number of policies that have a clear focus on the welfare of students and staff and on providing for a safe and supportive working and learning environment. It is recommended that all policy documents outline a proposed review date in order to effect the sustained review of policies over time.

The school has clear structures in place to facilitate staff engagement in the planning process. Task groups are selected from the staff according to interest and expertise to work on sample policy documents and the chair of each task group reports to the principal. As a means of enhancing the development of policies and their operational effectiveness it is important that task groups seek to dovetail the sample documents to the school’s context so that actual practices and procedures within the school are reflected therein. In line with the identified need for a more structured approach to school development planning it is recommended that a planning co-ordinator be included in the post structure to lead the process in consultation with the principal. Whilst the parents’ association and students have been consulted on a limited number of policies a more collaborative and consultative approach with all partners should be adopted in line with the requirements of the Education Act 1998.

The school is in the process of collating its school plan. The permanent section contains the school’s vision, profile, policy statements, curricular provision and the organisational details of other key areas of school life. The work achieved to date is commendable.

A list of areas in need of development is tabulated in the developmental section of the school plan. It is recommended that the key developmental priorities discussed at board and senior management level are documented in the developmental section. Focused action plans for each key priority should be outlined with specified targets to be achieved within specific timeframes. These timeframes should be drawn up over the short, medium and long term to facilitate the evaluation of progress. It is recommended that the task groups currently engaged in policy development and review are assigned responsibility for these developmental areas. This revised remit for task groups will further inculcate ownership and responsibility for the development of the school amongst all members of staff and nurture the concept of distributed leadership.

It was evident from a review of subject-department planning documentation that there are significant variations in the quality of subject planning. Whilst a small number of departments have developed comprehensive plans for the delivery of their subjects it was also evident that planning is at a nascent stage across other departments. It is recommended to effectively support the teaching and learning process that programmes of work detail the content to be delivered within each term or other specified timeframes. The content should be linked in an integrated manner to the corresponding learning outcomes, the particular resources used, the suggested methodologies including differentiation strategies and assessment modes. These plans should always refer to the current academic year and be streamlined to meet the needs of the students for whom the curricular year plans are being
delivered. In order to formalise and drive forward subject department planning it is strongly recommended that co-ordinators be appointed within departments on a rotational basis and that planning meetings would facilitate collaborative discussion and the sharing of expertise and practice. As a means of tracking progress in subject planning, minutes of all meetings should be recorded and included in the subject plan for reference.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M45/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted in December 2004 the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

3. Quality of Curriculum Provision

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

St. Gerald’s College offers a very wide range of subjects in both junior and senior cycles. It is commendable that the practice of curricular review is ongoing and that a number of subjects are currently being considered for inclusion or reorganisation on the school’s timetable. Senior management is aware that there is scope to increase the range of programmes provided to students as they enter the senior cycle and has planned an input from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) on the LCVP. As resources become available the introduction of the LCVP is strongly encouraged as it combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a range of activities that focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community in preparation for vocational success. This programme would provide a further means of catering for the range of abilities and interests of students at senior cycle. It is suggested that a task group should be put in place to liaise with schools that have successfully introduced the programme and to identify the training needs for interested staff and a co-ordinator.

At present French is the only modern language students can study to certificate level. Spanish is available to all students within the TY programme and German is also available on a modular basis. It is recommended that strategies be explored for the re-introduction of German to certificate level in order to facilitate students with an interest and aptitude in languages. Broadening the language skills base in the school will necessitate careful resource planning in terms of staff recruitment.

Students can access all subjects on offer at higher or ordinary level, and at common or foundation level where appropriate. Concurrent timetabling arrangement are in place for the delivery of all core subjects in most year groups thus enabling students to move between levels. This is commended as good practice. Students with special educational needs are encouraged to take a full range of subjects in line with their abilities.

It was evident from an analysis of the timetable that there are some issues that need to be addressed. Timetabled class period allocation for the core subjects should be reviewed to allow for greater equity in provision. There is no timetabled provision in Physical Education (PE) for fifth year and sixth year students and it is an optional component of the TY programme. This needs immediate attention in light of the numerous reports on the importance of appropriate levels of physical education in promoting a healthy and active lifestyle. In this regard and given the very good facilities that the school has for physical education all students should be provided with timetabled PE each week.
Class periods allocated to subjects are generally well distributed across the week which gives students suitable exposure to subjects. While subject teachers are consulted in relation to timetabling requirements, it was noted that a number of subjects with practical elements are not allocated double class periods. It is recommended that this provision be reviewed when constructing the timetable for the next academic year.

The school offers a very broad and balanced TY programme which is committed to the holistic development of the student in line with the school ethos and the philosophy of TY. The four layers of the TY programme including core, sampling, modular and calendar events are appropriately included in the programme’s curriculum. This provision is highly commended. The organisation of the modules is particularly effective as it affords students the opportunity to engage in an extensive range of activities that allow them to sample numerous areas of study across a range of disciplines. The TY programme plan is a comprehensive document that outlines some of the organisational details of the programme as well as curricular plans for all areas of study. In building on the very good work achieved to date the organisational details of the programme should be further developed to include the role of the co-ordinator, the calendar of events, samples of communication with parents and employers, engagement with in-service for TY and the evaluation instruments for all partners. It was reported that informal evaluation of the programme is conducted orally with teachers, parents and students. Formal documentation should be developed for the purposes of evaluation. The TY website www.ty.ie will serve as a useful reference point. On collation of such documents it is recommended that the TY co-ordinator conducts a yearly evaluation of all aspects of the programme to guide and inform future planning for the programme. The analysis of this evaluation should be furnished to senior management and the board.

Good practice was noted in the development of many subject and modular plans. In these cases learning objectives were articulated in terms of student learning outcomes. These plans focused on building skills and providing different and more experiential learning opportunities than in other years. This provision embraces the ethos of TY and is in line with best practice. This approach should be extended to all subject areas. The TY website offers a vast array of resource materials in many subject and modular areas to enhance teaching and learning. The various subject and modular plans should include a list of these resources and seek to incorporate their use in the classroom. It is commendable that some subject and modular plans had clear weighting criteria attaching to assessment modes which provided focused guidelines for student learning outcomes. This good practice should be developed in all subject areas. It is also recommended that end of module assessments are filed in the TY plan so that they are available to all teachers delivering modules, the TY co-ordinator and senior management.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Students and their parents are well informed and supported regarding subject choice and the programmes on offer in the school. The guidance counsellor plays a key role in the process of subject selection in both cycles. First-year students and their parents attend an enrolment night in the spring before admission to the school. They also receive a school prospectus which provides general information about the school and its practices, the curriculum, student-support services and discipline. A post enrolment meeting is held for parents in September to address any issues and to discuss subject choice. First-year students sample each of the six optional subjects on offer as part of the school’s two-month taster programme, from which two subjects are selected for study to Junior Certificate. This provision is commended as it assists students in making more informed subject decisions.

Subject decisions for Leaving Certificate are made at the end of Transition Year. In TY students are well advised on subject choice and its implications for careers as part of their
Guidance programme. An information night on making informed subject choices is also organised by the guidance counsellor for parents and students. In addition the guidance counsellor is available to meet with parents and students on an individual basis by appointment.

At senior cycle students are given an open choice of subject from which option bands are subsequently created based on students’ input. This student-centred approach is commended. The majority of students get what they want and they expressed satisfaction with this system.

The views of parents and students are accommodated when framing the curriculum. This is reflected in the introduction of Technology and in the consideration being currently given to the introduction of Agricultural Science.

The school caters for all levels of ability within its subject range. Students are encouraged to reach their full academic potential and high expectations are set for learning as evidenced in the number of students opting to study subjects at higher level.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

In line with the school’s ethos a very wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities of a sporting, cultural, social and aesthetic nature is offered to students. All students are strongly encouraged and facilitated to participate in these activities. There is a significant number of staff involved in a voluntary capacity in organising and leading these additional educational opportunities. The commitment and generosity of staff is highly commended for this work. The board of management and the parents are also commended for their support of and involvement in these school activities.

The school is committed to facilitating student engagement in a large number of co-curricular learning opportunities including the BT Young Scientist, Scifest, the Discover Sensors project, the mathematics Olympiad, the ETTA Young Technologist Project Competition, and the Robotics Ireland Lego League. Students in the school have competed at a national and international level in related competitions and have achieved much success. Music is an important aesthetic element in the curriculum provided. Musical activities extend to participation in Siansa Gaeil Linn, 2FM School of Rock competition and choir performance in the parish church. School trips to various events and venues are organised in order to continuously broaden the students’ educational experience. Public speaking and debating have a long tradition in the school and the school is currently being represented in the World Schools’ Debating Championships in Athens. The Gaisce awards and rugby are recent additions to the school’s menu of extra-curricular activities. Organised fund-raising events for charities serve to raise students’ social awareness and promote the Christian ethos espoused in the mission statement.

Students’ achievements are appropriately acknowledged and celebrated through an awards ceremony held in the school and through the college newsletter.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning structures are in place. Infrequent formal meetings are supplemented by more frequent informal meetings and rely on good professional relationships to underpin the process. It is strongly recommended that co-ordinators be appointed to each subject department and that the roles and responsibilities for these coordinators be agreed. The role of co-ordinator should be rotated among the members of
each department at agreed intervals. As well as co-ordinating the activities of the subject departments, the co-ordinators would provide management with a single point of contact for each department thus facilitating effective communication in relation to the quality of teaching and learning and to the resource and other requirements of the subject departments.

Greater use should be made of the school’s VLE in facilitating subject department planning. Department administration could be efficiently managed through the use of email while individual lesson plans could be shared and appropriate resources collaboratively developed. The use of this technology would provide additional time at planning meetings to further develop the existing schemes of work, to discuss effective teaching strategies and to extend the degree to which ICT and other resources are integrated into teaching and learning.

Analysis of student performance in the state examinations is carried out by management and the outcomes are circulated to the relevant subject departments. This good practice, which raises awareness of student attainment, allows the subject departments to examine underlying trends and facilitates long-term planning. It should be conducted by individual departments as part of their ongoing subject planning.

Elements of subject-department planning for TY are very good. However, a general review of the content of the core layer of the programme and the teaching strategies used in its delivery should be undertaken. Existing good practices, which provide opportunities for innovative teaching and experiential learning and which reduce the degree to which material from the Leaving Certificate courses are covered in TY should be adopted as standard across all subject areas.

Individual lessons were well planned. They had clear aims and objectives and incorporated very effective assessment procedures. The lessons had a good structure and featured well-defined units. Transitions between the different units were executed very successfully.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Overall the quality of teaching and learning was good.

Some very good examples of the presentation of learning objectives at the outset of lessons were seen. In these cases the sharing of learning objectives allowed for differentiation in the learning outcomes expected across the range of student abilities. Where a recap of learning objectives was conducted at the end of lessons this created opportunities for clear planning for subsequent lessons. This good practice should be incorporated into all lessons.

Lessons were well structured. While the pace of lessons was generally appropriate, in a small number of cases, the pace of the lessons could have been more appropriately adapted so as to challenge more able students.

A good range of syllabus skills were being taught in the lessons observed. These ranged from teaching students to identify the correct approaches to problem solving in Mathematics to practising writing skills in the languages. Good links were established with the students’ prior learning and the relevance to students’ lives of the material being covered was continually emphasised.

A wide range of teaching methods was in use in most lessons that succeeded in gaining the engagement and interest of almost all students. Active learning methodologies were used well in each of the subjects and participation in lessons was good on the whole. The use of ICT in the presentation of lessons was limited to science and physics lessons where it was
used to introduce topics, to assess students’ understanding of material covered, and to explain new material in a variety of different ways. In the case of Mathematics traditional teaching, involving teacher exposition at the board followed by individual student activity on assigned tasks, was the method most in evidence during the inspection. In the case of the English lessons observed, while questioning techniques were good on the whole, there was a tendency in some classes to focus too much on questions addressed to the group and not enough on questioning individual students. There is a danger that too much global questioning allows more confident students to dominate, while others are passive. In Irish an integrated approach was in use in about half the lessons and this was especially effective in one lesson where a single theme was covered across the four main language skills.

The classroom atmosphere was very good in almost all classes with students fully engaged. A characteristic feature of these lessons was the high expectations set for student learning. There was good rapport between teachers and students. This was supported by the high quality of classroom management with teachers encouraging students’ learning.

The quality of student learning as demonstrated by students’ responses to questions, the quality of their written work and their engagement in lessons was impressive.

4.3 Assessment

A whole-school policy on homework and study has been developed which includes clear roles for teachers, parents and students. This document commendably underpins homework and study practices within some subject departments and it is recommended that this good practice be extended to all departments. Homework tasks were reviewed and assigned in all lessons evaluated. Homework was entered into journals in almost all year groups and this good practice should be extended to all.

A whole-school assessment policy is currently in draft form. The guidelines available on formative assessment on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [www.Afl.ie](http://www.Afl.ie) should be used to guide the formulation of the school’s assessment policy. The development of this policy will serve as a unifying framework for the development of assessment practices and procedures in all subjects. In the random sample of student work reviewed very good written teacher feedback was in evidence in some subjects evaluated. It is recommended that all departments plan in a collaborative manner for the further use of formative assessment techniques in correcting students’ work, and in providing guidelines to students on maintaining records of their work, as well as a means to facilitate peer and self assessment.

Summative assessment takes place through in-house and class tests and feedback is provided to parents through parent-teacher meetings and reports that issue to homes twice yearly. It is good practice that some departments set common assessments for some year groups. It is recommended that common in-house assessment papers and marking schemes be set for all year groups, and for common levels. Assessment in TY takes place at the end of modules and an element of continuous assessment is used.

5. Quality of Support for Students

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school has accessed all of the resources to which it is entitled in order to provide support for students with special educational needs including resources for students with English as an additional language (EAL). It is recommended that all of these resources are deployed for the purposes for which they were intended.
The school has a special educational needs policy which outlines the objectives of its provision, the identification and assessment procedures used and the roles and responsibilities of some of the in-school personnel involved. This is commended. However, the policy needs to be further developed to outline the roles and responsibilities of all relevant internal and external partners and to include the review procedures for assessment of student progress. The inclusion of a section on a whole-school approach to the development of numeracy and literacy is also advised. The school has a special educational needs plan which provides a calendar of the work undertaken in the learning support/special educational needs department and the provision of supports for students each term. This is highly commended and could be further enhanced by indicating personnel involved and the methods employed to carry out tasks.

The school has a special educational needs co-ordinator. Thirteen teachers are involved in providing learning support and resource teaching for students. It is commendable that in the past number of years three teachers have gained postgraduate qualifications in special educational needs, one of whom now co-ordinates the provision of supports for students. Whilst there is informal liaison between the three qualified teachers, the school is encouraged to put in place a more formalised approach to facilitate meetings between key personnel and to effect further planning in the area.

First-year students with additional educational needs are identified through close liaison with feeder primary schools prior to their entry and through consultation with subject teachers once in the school. In September standardised norm-referenced tests are administered to all first-year students to identify those in need of additional support. These supports are provided in Irish, English, Maths, and French at junior cycle and in the core subjects at senior cycle. The main models of support used in literacy and numeracy provision are individual and small group settings. This provision is commended. Teachers are encouraged to give consideration to the implementation of team teaching as an additional model of delivery.

Communication between the learning-support team and mainstream teachers is accommodated at the start of the school year when all members of staff are informed of students in receipt of additional support. The teachers are also provided with the learning-support programme of work for the students in their classes. This is good practice. It is encouraged that a slot be allocated to the learning-support department at staff meetings to facilitate the sharing of information. This forum could also be used as an opportunity to monitor and review how students are benefiting from the additional support. It is recommended in order to build capacity in this area that whole-staff in-service based on themes relevant to differentiated teaching and learning approaches be organised. The website of the SESS [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie) will provide useful information and resource materials in this regard in addition to the school’s in-house learning-support expertise.

Appropriate channels of communication have been established with parents and with the relevant external agencies. Individual files are maintained on all students in receipt of additional support. There were variations noted in the programmes of work developed for individual students. Best practice was observed where programmes outlined content, methodology and review of student progress. It is encouraged that this provision be extended to all students’ programmes of work so that weaknesses and strengths can be shared with mainstream teachers.

The school has two special needs assistants. They contribute positively to the school community.
There are good resources in place for the provision of additional support including four dedicated rooms with access to laptops and educational software. In general these rooms were characterised by a print-rich and visually rich learning environment.

The school’s provision for EAL students and associated recommendations are contained in the English report associated with this report. Once an EAL co-ordinator has been appointed it is recommended that this role would include monitoring of attendance of EAL students, developing strategies to improve their attendance and integration into school life as well as further developing communication links with their parents. The school has developed a draft policy on intercultural education. This is commended. It is strongly encouraged that the policy includes practical strategies and measurable steps to identify how effectively EAL students are integrating into school life. Suggestions in this regard would include multilingual signs around the school, an intercultural day, translation of some school documentation into different languages and a mentoring system between senior cycle and EAL students.

A small number of Travellers are enrolled in the school and the majority are well integrated into school life. Management commented very positively on the likely completion of senior cycle by some of these students. Their inclusion is supported by the visiting teacher for Travellers (VTT) and by their involvement in activities organised as part of school life.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school has an allocation of 1.27 WTEs to support the delivery of the guidance programme in the school. The total ex-quota allocation must be deployed for guidance provision across the full student body from the beginning of the next academic year. The school has the services of a qualified guidance counsellor and another teacher is currently undertaking a post-graduate course in guidance and counselling. In TY guidance is provided on a nine-week modular basis to each class group. In fifth year and sixth year the guidance provision is co-timetabled with Religion and individual or small groups of students are withdrawn from Religion for Guidance. The remaining provision for Guidance involves the further withdrawal of students across a range of subjects. It is recommended that these timetabling arrangements are reviewed to ensure the optimal deployment of the guidance resources. The new provision should include time-tabled classes for fifth-year and sixth-year students.

Guidance and counselling play an important role in providing care for students in the school. First-year students are well supported as part of the induction programme in the transfer from primary to post-primary school. One of the guidance counsellors meets all first-year students on an individual basis and is involved in the mentoring programme between first-year and fifth-year students. The other guidance counsellor meets with parents of first-year students and provides advice and support to all first-year class groups prior to the selection of subjects. This provision is commended. Whilst there is some informal liaison between SPHE and guidance closer links need to be forged in the cross-curricular planning for the delivery of guidance components to second-year and third-year students.

Study skills seminars are provided for all year groups by outside personnel. The guidance counsellor has established very good links with third level colleges, with local businesses through involvement in the TY work experience programme and with education providers in the community. Parents are kept informed regularly about guidance activities and the school’s newsletter includes a dedicated slot for guidance related information. This provision is highly commended.
There are clear procedures in place for referral of students to counselling and individual counselling is available as required to students who are experiencing difficulties. Appropriate links have been also established with external professional services as is deemed necessary and good contacts have been built up with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Work began on the formation of a whole-school guidance plan in 2005 and a number of elements are in place including policies on counselling, psychometric testing, referral procedures, subject choice and induction practice and policy. It is recommended that the guidance plan is further developed to incorporate a whole-school approach to guidance planning and provision. A guidance team, comprising key school personnel, should be involved in this work. The plan should clearly define the role of the guidance counsellor and the role of staff members in relation to guidance. It should outline the linkages among guidance and the school’s curricular programmes, student support structures, the learning-support department and external agencies. Detailed programmes of work have been developed for TY and senior cycle class groups. It is recommended that a programme of guidance activities for each year group, to include the three separate but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance be developed for all year groups. All programmes of work should be dated and provide a facility for review. In the development of the guidance plan the following documents should be consulted, Planning a School Guidance Programme, National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) 2004 and Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students’ access to appropriate guidance Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science. In addition the policy template for the development of a guidance plan available on www.education.ie should prove useful in developing a whole-school guidance plan. Once collated this document should be presented to parents, students and the board of management to obtain their views and input.

The guidance counsellor has a well-resourced office and is facilitated to access the school’s ICT facilities. Professional development opportunities for the guidance counsellor are very well supported by senior management and the counsellor is commended for showing commitment to continuous professional development.

There are several structures in place to support pastoral care of students. The structures include a pastoral care team, the class head system, the guidance service, the religious education department, the chaplain and the mentoring system. While these provisions are commended, a more formal, centralised and cohesive system should be put in place in order to facilitate communication and the co-ordination of supports.

The pastoral care team consists of relevant school personnel and they meet approximately once a term. During these meetings members of the care team are assigned to meet with students in need of support. This is good practice and reflects the student-centred ethos of the school. The school is commended for documenting a formal pastoral care policy and a range of other policies supporting positive care of students. The school organises an anti-bullying awareness week and the display monitor at the main reception area promotes awareness of the anti-bullying ethos of the school. The pastoral care of teachers is also provided for in policy development and the promotion of staff morale is part of a post of responsibility. The school has developed a dignity in the workplace policy. This policy should ensure that all teachers are empowered to develop in their profession as educators.

The pastoral care structure operates in parallel with the code of behaviour and the school’s disciplinary procedures. This is in line with good practice and enables early supportive interventions to be put in place for students. The class heads play an important role in the pastoral care and discipline of students and in developing positive relationships with them.
Continuity of care is a salient feature of the system and each class retains the same class head from first year to fifth year. Where sanctions of detention and suspension have been imposed on students a designated staff member meets with individual students to discuss and reflect on their behaviour.

A student mentoring system operates with a group of fifth year students assigned to a number of first year students to help them in their transition to post-primary school. Mentors are matched to students on the basis of common interests. This is highly commended and the mentors involved are lauded on the level of understanding they displayed towards the students assigned to them. Whilst no official training is provided to mentors they had a clear understanding of their role and remit in an advisory capacity. Mentors are selected by teachers based on their disciplinary record and level of maturity. It is suggested that the supportive work carried out by these students is acknowledged at the awards ceremony at the end of the year.

Students’ achievements in a range of areas are appropriately acknowledged and celebrated in an awards evening held at the end of the school year. This is in keeping with good practice and serves to positively motivate and affirm the students. It is evident that the pastoral care of students is of central importance in all school activities.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- St. Gerald’s College cultivates and nurtures an atmosphere of respect and care among all school partners. The mission statement and Lasallian ethos imbue many areas of school life.
- The school has an inclusive ethos and students from all backgrounds and abilities are welcome to attend the school.
- The board of management takes an active role in school affairs including financial administration, policy formation, staff recruitment and development, infrastructural improvements and planning for curricular enhancement.
- The principal and deputy principal are a dynamic and effective leadership team and share a progressive vision for the continued development of the school.
- Senior management operates an open door policy in support of staff, students and parents and very good links have been established by the school with outside agencies and the broader community.
- Senior management is committed to the on-going development of a professional learning community and teachers are encouraged and accommodated to avail of continuing professional development.
- A well-disciplined and ordered atmosphere, underpinned by a clearly communicated code of behaviour and supporting pastoral structures, prevails in the school.
- The parents’ council is committed to supporting the school and their contributions are valued.
- The ancillary staff plays a key role in the administration and up-keep of the school.
- The school is maintained to a high standard, has very good facilities and has an extensive ICT infrastructure.
- The school has made significant progress in policy development. The board and senior management have identified key priorities for whole school development and are engaged in planning for these.
- The school offers a wide range of subjects in both junior and senior cycles.
- Teachers have facilitated and contributed generously to the school’s diverse programme of extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
• The philosophy of the TY programme is enshrined in its broad and balanced provision.
• Overall the quality of teaching and learning was good and active learning methodologies were used well in each of the subjects evaluated.
• The quality of student learning and their engagement in lessons was impressive.
• Pastoral care is integral to the school’s ethos and many structures and procedures are in place.

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

• The post structure should be reviewed to meet the identified needs of the school and the review should be conducted in line with Circular PPT 29/02.
• To ensure compliance with Circular M29/95 the daily time-tabled pastoral care provision should be reviewed.
• The school’s health and safety statement should be reviewed and up-dated.
• Subject department planning should be further developed and enhanced by the collaborative sharing of expertise and practice, by the appointment of subject coordinators and by the recording of planning meetings. All schemes of work should be current and should detail the learning outcomes, resources and methodologies to support the attainment of these outcomes.
• The school should give due consideration to the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as resources become available.
• Time-tabling arrangements should ensure that Physical Education is part of the curriculum for all students.
• All resources provided to support students with additional educational needs should be deployed for their intended purpose.
• The full ex-quota allocation for Guidance should be used to deliver the guidance provision and time-tabling arrangements should be reviewed to ensure the optimal deployment of the guidance resources. The guidance plan should be further developed to incorporate a whole-school approach to guidance planning and provision.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and the deputy principal and the board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

• Subject Inspection of English – 21 January 2010
• Subject Inspection of Irish – 27 November 2009
• Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 21 January 2010
• Subject Inspection of Science and Physics – 19 January 2010

Published, December 2010
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 and the whole school community would like to thank the evaluation team sincerely for the professional and courteous manner in which the inspection was carried out.
- The Board is very pleased that the report recognises that the Lasallian ethos imbues many areas of school life and that the quality of teaching and learning is of a high standard.
- The Board acknowledges that the evaluation process was a very supportive and beneficial experience for the whole school community.

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 welcomes the key recommendations of the report and will endeavour to implement all of them as effectively as possible.
- The following recommendations have already been implemented/investigated:
  - The timetable has been adjusted to ensure twenty eight hours of instruction time per week.
  - The introduction of LCVP has been investigated and its introduction for 2010/2011 has been deferred due to the nationwide withdrawal of resources by the DES for start-up schools this year.
  - Physical Education is now part of the curriculum for all students.