Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65470F

Date of inspection: 22 October 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Ursuline Secondary School was undertaken in October 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in Transition Year (TY) and in four subjects was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on this programme and 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

The Ursuline campus extends outwards from the town centre of Thurles along the banks of the River Suir. It incorporates the Ursuline Secondary School, Scoil Angela (the Ursuline primary school), the Ursuline Convent Boarding School, St Angela’s Academy of Music and the Ursuline Convent. Teaching on the present site commenced in 1787 when the Ursuline Sisters first came to Thurles.

Currently, 712 girls are enrolled in the school. Of these, 130 are boarders. Approximately one quarter of incoming students receive their primary education in Scoil Angela while the remainder come from traditional feeder schools located within a twenty-five kilometre radius of Thurles.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school’s mission statement derives from the teachings of Saint Angela Merici, the foundress of the Ursuline Order, who sought to impart the Christian values of love, truth, tolerance and honesty as a means of developing the whole person. The Ursuline Secondary School is a Catholic school which seeks to nurture in each student a personal relationship with God as well as to instil the courage and confidence to live in justice and truth. Given the need for effective partnerships to ensure successful educational outcomes, emphasis is placed on fostering positive relationships between all members of the school community in an environment that is both pleasant and caring. Of particular importance is the recognition of each student as a unique individual. In looking to develop in each student her individual spirit of creativity and enterprise, active participation in the life of the wider community is strongly encouraged.

The school is under the trusteeship of the Irish Ursuline Union. Their Religious and Educational Philosophy document sets out the primary objective of Ursuline Schools and outlines how management, teaching staff, students, parents, and the local community can work to create a school community that fosters gospel values. A number of structures have been established by the trustees to support the school in maintaining its ethos in day-to-day activities. The work of the Education Officer makes a meaningful contribution to the management of the school and ensures that the school is well placed to continue its work into the future. Staff induction days, training seminars for newly-appointed members of the board of management and workshops on leadership for students are just some of the initiatives that have strengthened links between the trustees and members of the board of management, parents, students and staff members such as newly-appointed teachers and catechists. The Education Office convenes approximately five meetings of the Education Commission each year. These are attended by the principal and one other staff member, and
serve as a forum for open discussion on general school matters as well as providing a platform for introducing new educational developments.

All members of the school community are committed to an educational provision that is in keeping with the spirit and ideals of Saint Angela. In enabling students to reach their potential and to develop their unique gifts and talents, particular emphasis is placed on mutual respect and partnership. These two concepts underpin all relationships within the community. Consequently, long-standing consultative processes ensure active participation and engagement by all in the provision of an educational experience that is truly holistic and rewarding for all members of the school community.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted with eight members. Four members are nominated by the trustees, two are members of the teaching staff and two are parents of students enrolled in the school. The principal acts as secretary to the board. The combined expertise of the trustee nominees in the areas of education, law, engineering and finance has proven invaluable over time. Similarly, the parent and teacher nominees bring with them their thorough understanding of school life and student experiences. Having the Education Officer of the Irish Ursuline Union as a board member ensures that the trustees are kept well informed on the work of the school.

The board meets approximately six times per year. All members are actively involved in various aspects of the school’s educational provision, and are fully aware of the many activities that constitute school life. The board understands its function and statutory obligations and has availed of relevant training.

The board believes that open channels of communication between its members and other members of the school community are key to its effective operation. The inclusion of the names of the members of the board of management in various school publications and circulars informs parents and students of who the board members are. In the board’s endeavours to keep abreast of all school matters, the principal’s report is included in the agenda for all meetings. Minutes reviewed indicate that discussion of items reported is at all times thorough, and that decision-making procedures are open. Requests by teachers or parents to include further matters for discussion are communicated to the principal in advance of the meeting and included in the agenda. An agreed statement is drafted at the conclusion of each meeting and is displayed on the staff notice-board. The school yearbook is currently the primary means of informing the general parent body of the work of the school. As proposed in Section 20 of the Education Act, it is recommended that the board issue an annual report to the relevant parties on the operation and performance of the school.

Whole-school planning is an integral component of the board’s work. Work on policy formulation and adoption is on-going. Policies tend to be developed at school level, using teacher, managerial and student input, prior to being presented to the board for its views. Legally-required policies on admissions, attendance, child protection, health and safety, behaviour and special education have been developed and formally ratified by the board. Other policies developed include anti-bullying, homework, and pastoral care. The multicultural and CCTV policies are due for ratification, while the development of a critical incident policy and plan is about to commence. The learning support policy is currently under review. It is recommended that the date of ratification and a proposed date for review be included in each policy.

The provision of adequate space for the optimal functioning of the school remains a key developmental priority for the board. To date, the school has funded the building of a sports
hall, astro-turf pitches and a visitors’ car park. At the time of the inspection, planning for a major extension to the main school building was well advanced in that the design team had submitted a full report with costings to the Department of Education and Skills. Proposed extension works will result in the provision of new classrooms, a guidance suite, a learning support suite, new science laboratories, new specialist rooms for Art, Technology and Technical Graphics, an upgraded staffroom and workroom, a computer room, secure storage facilities, pastoral offices, a new principal’s office and general office and an upgraded reception area. Senior management and members of the middle-management and student-support teams welcome in particular the proposed provision of new or replacement offices as the shortage of meeting and workrooms, combined with a lack of space in existing offices, is an on-going challenge.

1.3 In-school management

The principal has held the position for almost twenty-nine years. The deputy principal took up her position at the beginning of this school year. She has been a member of the teaching staff for many years and prior to this held a middle-management post. As expected, given the time of year of the evaluation, the dynamic of the senior management team was still evolving. It was clear, however, that both individuals are guided by the school’s ethos and share a deep commitment to enabling each and every student to reach her potential. Both the principal and the deputy principal display a deep sense of loyalty to the school and its traditions, and they value the relationships that have been fostered over time with other members of the school community. These relationships are characterised by mutual respect and a strong sense of collegiality which in turn motivate people to support each other and to exhibit openness and flexibility when responding to change.

The common purpose shared by the principal and the deputy principal is to display a strong work ethic that will inspire staff and students to work to the best of their ability. They are both of the view that their hands-on approach towards the co-ordination and monitoring of all aspects of school life creates an environment in which all members of the school community display high levels of participation and engagement. Their presence on the ground throughout the school day means that they serve as a central node through which almost every detail of school life passes. While such an approach ensures that information transfers between various members of the school community, it places an onus on senior management to act as a median for almost all forms of school communication. Consequently, the principal attends to the administrative duties attached to her post in the evening times and at weekends. The recent appointment of the deputy principal presents an opportunity for a review of the duties performed by senior management and for delineation of tasks that are to be performed jointly or individually.

Middle-management positions present senior management with an opportunity to delegate certain managerial responsibilities to the more senior members of the teaching staff. A list of duties that relate specifically to assistant principal and special duties teacher positions has been compiled. Some of the appointments appear to simply attach a formal responsibility to work that had been completed by the post-holder in a voluntary capacity prior to promotion. As part of the upcoming review on middle-management posts, it is recommended that a list of duties be compiled based on the managerial needs of the school rather than on the skill set of the post-holders. It would be worthwhile to consider the merit of appointing a weighting to each of these duties, thus allocating responsibilities in a manner that would ensure a more equitable distribution of workload. Another benefit of allocating greater responsibility to middle-management would be the creation of leadership opportunities for members of the teaching staff. A number of post-holders display an interest in availing of such opportunities and senior management is urged to avail of this resource through the establishment of school-based initiatives or projects.
Many teachers, while not holding a middle management post, also contribute to certain aspects of school management, particularly in the areas of student support and subject co-ordination. Subject faculties are well established and their work in areas such as faculty co-ordination, co-curricular activities and subject-development planning is on-going. Key personnel in the area of student support include the guidance counsellor, the special educational needs co-ordinator, the principal, year heads and class tutors. Formation of a core student support team, which would meet on a regular basis to discuss various aspects of support provision, is recommended as it would complement existing informal communicative structures while also validating student support as a key management function. Other managerial functions, that could be led by designated teams, include school development planning and education support. Ideally, such teams should include at least one member of middle management and all members should be selected based on their skills, experience and interest in the area.

Staff members have participated in continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities as they have become available. Every effort is made to facilitate attendance by subject teachers at subject-specific seminars and in-service workshops that occur during school hours. Further evidence of teachers’ dedication to developing their professional knowledge is their willingness to participate in CPD activities in the evening time and at weekends. The *Thurles Staff Development Day*, an initiative that has been developed recently in collaboration with the other three second-level schools in the town, involves the convening of a day-long conference for all teaching staff. Personnel working in the Kilkenny Education Centre, or with links to it, deliver workshops on a wide variety of topics. In addition to subject-specific inputs, topics on the programme for November 2009 included co-operative learning, positive behaviour management, assessment for learning (AfL), differentiated teaching strategies and motivating the reluctant learner. The benefits accruing from this approach to CPD are many. Not only can teachers choose their preferred area of exploration in response to their individual needs but it also affords teachers an opportunity to learn from practices applied in other schools. Whole-staff in-service is also organised at school level, often at the beginning of the school year. A variety of guest-speakers have delivered seminars on topics such as bullying, restorative practices, leadership and special education needs. Selection of these areas of focus is often based on needs that have been identified by members of the teaching staff. Indeed staff members possess much professional expertise that could be shared with colleagues in a more formal setting. The merits of delegating some aspects of CPD delivery to members of the teaching staff are worthy of consideration. An immediate benefit would be that follow-on workshops could be convened throughout the school year ensuring that the selected topic(s) would remain ‘live’ following the initial input. Indeed, the potential exists for a school-specific action research initiative which would involve trialling the effectiveness of new and alternative approaches to teaching and learning. This point is revisited in Sections 2 and 4 of this report.

Effective management of students is an on-going priority for staff. Senior management is strongly of the view that its high expectations of all students with regard to attendance, punctuality and participation, as articulated at school assemblies, in circulars to parents and in school policies, are key to high levels of achievement. This view is shared by the teaching staff, who believes that the strong work ethic exhibited by all staff members motivates students to commit to their academic studies as well as to positively engage with a range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The promotion of responsible behaviour requires promotion of mutual respect, a notion that is enshrined in the school’s mission statement. Thus, staff actively supports activities such as those organised by the school council, or the annual musical performance, as they embed the understanding that all aspects of school life rely on effective partnerships. An additional advantage of student involvement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities is the manner in which each student is required to take ownership of her individual contributions to task completion.
which in turn empowers her to behave in a mature and responsible manner. The anti-bullying initiative ‘Big Sis, Little Sis’, led by the school council, illustrates how students, when enabled to do so, can devise imaginative ways of promoting caring and respectful attitudes towards each other. Students are encouraged to become independent thinkers and to develop leadership qualities. Involvement in initiatives such as the Green Schools programme also provides them with opportunities to develop their communicative and interpersonal skills through their engagement with each other, with staff and with members of the wider community.

Student attendance is monitored very closely, particularly by both the principal and the deputy principal. Strategies developed to maximise student attendance include the requirement for parents to have contacted the school before nine-thirty on the day of their daughter’s absence. Detailed records of student progress and achievement are maintained by class tutors, with particular attention paid to students who may be ‘at risk’. Class tutors, especially those with responsibility for junior-cycle students, attach much importance to fostering positive relationships with the students under their care. The school’s carefully-constructed code of behaviour highlights the role of the class tutor in maintaining a positive school environment that is conducive to learning.

The school’s code of behaviour, and the development of new approaches to promoting responsible behaviour, feature regularly on the agenda of staff meetings. Indeed, the items discussed correspond directly to a number of chapters in the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) publication Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools (2008). Overall, the school’s code is a very balanced document that adheres to core principles that underpin an effective code of behaviour. In particular, it attributes personal responsibility to staff, students and parents for upholding the code, especially in the areas of attendance and the fostering of a positive learning environment. It also clearly details the procedures to be taken when responding to inappropriate behaviour. Key to these procedures is the school’s demerit system, whereby certain behavioural issues warrant demerit points which, on accumulation, may result in detention or further sanctions. While the need for specific sanctions is acknowledged, the use of a demerit system could be regarded as a more negative than positive intervention in that it does not appear to reward or encourage good behaviour. In light of staff’s highly positive response to a recent input in the area of restorative practices, it is recommended that the use of a demerit system alone be reviewed and that a system that also looks to affirm good behaviour be developed.

As expressed in the school’s enrolment policy, inclusivity, equality, freedom of choice and respect for diversity are the core principles that underpin the school’s admissions process. The staff is proud of the school’s accomplishments in fostering these principles and, in particular, of the manner in which students with additional educational needs integrate well with the rest of the student body. Review of documentation, observation of practice and discussions with various members of the school community confirmed that the process of enrolling students is open and clear. In an effort to extend the spirit of inclusivity, the decision was taken recently to hold an open night in advance of enrolment so that an even greater number of prospective students can get a flavour of school life. However, the addition of a note in the enrolment policy, which states that prospective students must be “capable of absorbing 60% of the curriculum as laid down by the Department of Education and Skills”, can only be viewed as exclusionary. Not only is it open to misinterpretation, it does not appear to reflect practice nor attitudes within the school. Therefore it is strongly recommended that the statement be removed.

The establishment and maintenance of effective communication channels with parents is an important school function. An individual meeting between the principal and the parents of incoming first-year students occurs each May. This presents opportunities to remind parents of the role they play in their daughter’s education and to lay the foundation of a relationship
the school will develop with parents over time. An information meeting for all first-year parents, at which parents are introduced to their daughter’s class tutor, takes place early in the school-year. Every effort is made to keep parents aware of their daughter’s progress. Parent-teacher meetings are arranged for all junior-cycle year groups and for fifth and sixth-year students. An end-of-year awards night is arranged for TY students and their parents. Parents are kept informed of all relevant activities and are also regularly reminded of their responsibilities in supporting their daughter as she progresses through her post-primary education. In addition to information evenings, regular written communication draws parents attention to various aspects of school life as well as reminding them of school rules and policies.

The parents’ council is an active organisation which has played a significant role in the life of the school for over thirty years. It is affiliated to the National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCpp). Two new members are elected each year by the general parent body and remain on the council for the duration of their daughter’s post-primary education. They meet approximately six times a year, and minutes of these meetings indicate that items on the agenda are explored in a manner that facilitates discussion and debate. The principal’s attendance at these meetings ensures that parents are fully briefed on all school events and activities. It also enables parents to have an advisory role and to have an input into policy development. The parents’ council has identified a specific role for itself in providing support to the general parent body. Based on information gathered through informal communications with parents, and in consultation with senior management, it organises information evenings for parents which often involve presentations by guest speakers on topics such as social networking, healthy eating and other parenting matters.

A notable feature of life in the school is the positive links that exist between the school and members of its wider community. While situated in a relatively small urban area, the school community is essentially rural and the spirit of collegiality and collectiveness that traditionally characterises rural communities permeates every aspect of school life. Students, in particular, play an active role in the community and their participation is reciprocated in the form of various supports offered to the school by local businesses, by partners in education and by various care agencies. School management is deeply appreciative of the willingness of members of the wider community to share their professional expertise with them. The annual musical performance is just one example of the school’s effective collaboration with the wider community.

Self-evaluation and review are embedded in the school’s culture. There is a general willingness to engage in review of existing structures and to consider alternative approaches. Meetings of the board of management, the staff and the parents’ council often involve debate regarding possible amendments to, or developments of, existing processes. Much of this evaluation is led by the principal who conducts a formal end-of-year review with each staff member. Other formal evaluative processes include the use of feedback questionnaires, which are distributed to parents of TY students, as well as detailed analyses of students’ results in certificate examinations. Review of documentation would indicate that, in some instances, discussions around remodelling existing structures tend to be lengthy and that too much time can be spent analysing the possible impact of alternatives rather than trialling them and reviewing their effectiveness. Formation of task groups to oversee the evaluation of existing structures and the implementation of alternatives could reduce the time spent on debate, and it is therefore recommended that responsibility for certain elements of school self-evaluation and review be devolved to members of the teaching staff.

1.4 Management of resources
The provision, generally, of twenty-eight hours and ten minutes of instruction per week for students is in line with Departmental requirements. In addition, the school calendar for the current year indicates a plan for 167 instruction days. Mainstream teachers have been allocated an appropriate level of class-contact time in accordance with the staffing allocation to the school. Additional allocations provided through the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and for supports for students with additional educational needs are being used for the purposes of instruction. The allocation for Guidance is used fully for the purposes of both class-contact and individual counselling.

Members of the teaching staff are appropriately deployed. Recent reductions in staffing allocations have presented some difficulties but overall the wide range of teaching subjects is provided for appropriately. While the arrangement whereby all junior-cycle class tutors teach Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) to their respective classes is praiseworthy, there remains a need for many of these teachers to enhance their skills by accessing the relevant training, especially in methodologies that are particular to SPHE. It is also recommended that the number of teachers involved in the teaching of Mathematics be reduced to allow for the development of a core team of teachers each of whom is allocated significant contact time with the subject.

Ancillary staff members, including the secretary, caretakers, cleaners, the sports-hall manager and the laboratory technician, play a key role in ensuring the smooth operation of the school. The professional manner in which they carry out their duties, and the positive relationships they have with all members of the school community, ensure that the school environment is at all times welcoming, orderly and clean. The special-needs assistant also enjoys a good relationship with other staff members and students.

The school has an extensive campus that includes the main school building, seven prefabricated classrooms, one prefabricated technical room, one prefabricated art room, a sports/concert complex, a music block, car-parking facilities, astro-turf playing pitches, a green area for gaelic games as well as outdoor tennis and basketball courts. Its idyllic setting along the banks of the River Suir, but yet a short distance from the centre of Thurles town, provides students with easy access to a range of local amenities while also giving them plenty of space to enjoy the many and varied aspects of school life.

Despite the lack of physical space within the main school building, there is an array of facilities that support teaching and learning. There are twenty-nine classrooms and a range of specialist rooms. There is also a prayer room, a general purpose/assembly area, a school library, an administrative area and a learning-support room. Apart from senior management, the full-time guidance counsellor is the only member of the teaching staff to currently have a designated office. It is hoped that the proposed new extension will address, in particular, the shortage of office/work space for both secretarial and teaching staff, as well as providing much needed storage space. It is expected that the proposed provision of additional classrooms, as well as more appropriate facilities for student support, will significantly enhance the quality of life for staff and students alike.

The school’s computer room is currently housed in a temporary location. It is equipped with twenty-four PCs. Many classrooms have data projectors, as well as a computer that has a high-speed internet connection. A good effort has been made to provide satisfactory levels of access to information and communications technology (ICT) for both staff and students. The proposed extension to the school will also involve an ICT upgrade and, with greater access to a wide range of the most up-to-date technologies, it should be a definite aim of the school that the use of ICT will be integrated to a greater extent into the teaching and learning process.
Ensuring the health, safety and welfare of all members of the school community is a key management function. Indeed, a health and safety planning group was formed during the initial stages of the whole-school development-planning process. A member of middle management has been appointed to fulfil the duties of the school’s health and safety officer. All staff members have been made aware of their duties in relation to ensuring a safe environment for all, and various health and safety issues are discussed at staff meetings from time to time. Part of the everyday role of those teachers who work in specialist classrooms is to deal with specific safety-related matters on an on-going basis. All staff members have received some level of first-aid training while a selected few are in receipt of on-going training in the use of a defibrillator. Following a health and safety audit in 2008, a number of safety issues were addressed in the technology room. Another outcome included the development of an annual checklist, which records any hazards identified and the steps taken to address them. An inspection of the fire alarm and a fire drill occur annually, while all fire-fighting equipment is tested on a quarterly basis. Each member of staff has his or her own copy of the health and safety statement, which is reviewed and updated on a yearly basis. Future review of the health and safety statement should involve the naming of individuals personally responsible for performing tasks specifically assigned to him or her, as required by the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Future review processes should also refer to the joint publication by the Department and the State Claims Agency Review of Occupational Health and Safety in the Technologies in Post-Primary Schools.

The fostering of a sense of environmental responsibility is firmly embedded in the school’s culture. This work is driven by the school’s Green Schools Committee which was established eight years ago. The committee is structured so that there are two representatives from every class group as well as two members of the teaching staff who provide guidance and support. This structure ensures that there is whole-school ownership of the school’s environmental management system. Flags have been awarded for: litter and waste; water and energy. Particular commendation is due to the students for the creativity they have brought to various campaigns such as ‘Bling Shoes’, and for the cross-curricular links they have forged with subjects such as Science.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

September 2002 saw the formal establishment of the whole-school planning process with the formation of task groups and the provision of designated meeting times every week for each planning group. The principal and deputy principal acted as joint co-ordinators. Such a structured approach led to the production of much documentation that now forms the permanent section of the plan. A review of documentation indicates that the planning process was very thorough, and that task groups were provided with clear guidelines, as well as an array of useful tools, that enabled them to reflect on existing provision and to consider possible areas for development. Due to a number of factors, the weekly meetings have since been discontinued and currently, school development planning features as an item on the agenda of staff meetings. Discussion at these meetings mainly centres on amendments to existing policies, such as the code of behaviour and related policies such as anti-bullying and mobile-phone usage. While the level of commitment to driving whole-school planning has waned somewhat, senior management is hopeful that, following the implementation of a number of structural changes, there will be a renewed commitment by all to advancing the planning process. With the re-establishment of a more structured approach to whole-school planning, it would be useful to formulate an action plan that looks to address identified needs and, based on this information, to allocate responsibility to individuals or groups for completion of tasks within a set timeframe.
To date, policy formulation has been guided by a firm commitment to respectful and effective partnerships between all members of the school community. The notion of partnership is worthy of further exploration as new structures and approaches are developed to promote whole-school planning. It is recommended that responsibility for planning be devolved to a steering group. This group should work in partnership with senior management, who would oversee the process, and also with staff who would work in task groups focusing on particular areas. Consultation with other partners such as students and parents, whose insights and inputs into new developments are important, should also be a feature of the planning process. Furthermore, it is suggested that advancing work already started in relation to whole-school guidance planning would clarify roles and responsibilities with regard to the manner in which students are supported. This would also confirm formal links between internal and external support sectors and formalise the communication channels that maintain these links.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

Subject and programme planning have been facilitated through the formation of subject and programme faculties. Faculty members are encouraged to work in collaboration, and time is provided at the beginning of the school year to enable them to agree a programme of work for the school year. Guest-speakers have addressed faculty members on topics such as assessment for learning (AfL). Observation of practice, and discussions with various subject teachers, would indicate that discussion at faculty and other meetings relates for the most part to administrative matters or to co-curricular and extracurricular activities. As a means of encouraging faculties to further explore the content of these and other topics, it would be worthwhile to consider the benefits of incorporating such themes into the whole-school planning process and of providing faculties with on-going opportunities to share practice with each other and with other faculties. Indeed, findings that will be discussed in section four of this report would indicate a requirement for a more student-centred approach during lessons and therefore, it is recommended that whole-school exploration of curricular themes that would have a direct impact on the teaching and learning experience in all classes be considered. The expertise that exists among staff members should be availed of when seeking examples of good practice.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

A full and varied curriculum allows for students personal and academic development. A wide range of subjects is provided at both junior and senior cycle. A ten-period day ensures that provision for these subjects is generally in line with syllabus requirements. Classes are of mixed-ability, with the exception of some banding and setting arrangements in certain year groups in Irish and Mathematics. In reviewing these arrangements, it is important that priority be given to ensuring the highest possible expectation for the greatest number of students in all cases. Students are encouraged to study their choice of subjects at the highest level appropriate to their ability and every support is given to them when choosing levels for the purposes of certificate examinations. Analysis of trends indicates that a significant cohort of students study most of their subjects at higher level with Leaving Certificate
Mathematics being the only exception. While this trend has proven difficult to counteract in the past, management, teachers of mathematics and parents are asked to explore ways in which students who achieve good results at junior cycle can be encouraged to continue studying the higher-level course at senior cycle, particularly in the context of the introduction of Project Maths.

Currently, students take twelve subjects for the Junior Certificate examination and eight subjects for the Leaving Certificate examination, one of which is the link modules for those students taking the LCVP. The number of examination subjects students carry has been a topic of debate and discussion at meetings of the board of management, at staff meetings and at meetings of the Parents’ Council for some time. Students have also been approached on the matter. Certain groups are of the view that the number of examination subjects carried by students is excessive and that it should be reduced. Others believe that the current arrangement constitutes a broad and balanced curriculum and that it should remain. It is recommended that a consensus be reached as a matter of urgency on this critically important issue for students and, if change is decided upon, that it be implemented sooner rather than later. In these discussions, reference should be made to recommendations in the Rules and Programme for Second Level Schools.

Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE), SPHE, Religious Education (RE) and Physical Education (PE) all form part of the core curriculum at junior cycle and provision is in line with syllabus requirements. In addition to the established Leaving Certificate programme, all senior-cycle students have the option of choosing to participate in the TY programme and the LCVP. Demand for, and uptake of, these programmes is strong. The yearly modification of subject combinations on the timetable ensures that all students who apply for the LCVP can generally be catered for. A selection procedure that is fair and well organised exists for entry into TY whereby students must apply in writing for acceptance onto the programme. To bring greater clarity and formality to the selection process, it is recommended that the entry criteria be documented and circulated to all students and parents in advance of the process.

The LCVP, which aims to foster a spirit of enterprise and initiative, is becoming an increasingly popular choice for senior-cycle students. Vocational subject groupings vary from year to year depending on student choice. The programme is well integrated into the timetable and every effort is made to accommodate all students who express a wish to follow this programme. Appropriate access to ICT for LCVP students is facilitated as much as possible. The involvement of a number of teachers in delivery of the link modules facilitates the sharing of ideas and also ensures that a pool of teachers possesses the specialist knowledge required to deliver the programme. The school’s full-time guidance counsellor is acting co-ordinator of the programme and duties include dissemination of information to other team members, monitoring of students on work experience and overseeing assessment, record-keeping and reporting procedures. Given the significant workload already attached to guidance-related activities, it is recommended that another staff member be assigned responsibility for the co-ordination of LCVP.

The TY programme offered to students is of a very high quality and is characterised by very good planning. A very effective team coordinates the programme and leads a committed group of teachers who deliver very good outcomes for TY students. The curriculum offered is interesting, varied and challenging for students.

Much time and deliberation is expended each year in planning the school timetable. Not only is ensuring equality of access to an extensive range of subjects and programmes a primary aim in its construction, but a further effort is made to ensure that the appropriate staff members are deployed to assist students in receipt of learning support as well as ensuring that room allocation is appropriate to subject-specific requirements. While the
3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Student transition into various programmes is well managed and underpinned by very good communicative and information-sharing processes. First-year students take all subjects offered at junior cycle level. This includes the study of two modern European languages and choral singing. This system, whereby students receive an experience of all subjects, ensures that students make informed decisions when choosing their subjects for second year. Students with special educational needs can opt to study only one modern language and this enables them to avail of additional support in other subject areas.

A cognitive ability test administered in first year, followed by a differential aptitude test administered in third year, highlights students’ individual areas of strength and assists them in making suitable choices for the Leaving Certificate programme. Members of subject faculties meet with third-year students to inform them of subject content at senior cycle and to answer any queries. Students are presented with an open choice and subject bands are created in accordance with their choices.

Subject sampling is a feature of the TY programme which is of great benefit to students when selecting subjects for the Leaving Certificate programme. In addition to a core curriculum of Irish, English, Maths, a modern language, RE and PE, students can sample History, Geography, a combination of Physics, Chemistry and Biology, Music, Art and Home Economics. Allocation of students to classes of mixed-ability is in keeping with the philosophy of TY and presents students with an opportunity to remediate particular issues or weaknesses.

The strength of the school’s consultative processes with parents is reflected in the quality of its communication and information-sharing practices when drawing parents’ attention to subject choices and their implications. Written communication in the form of information leaflets is enhanced through the organisation of information evenings. Such gatherings provide opportunities for parents and students to clarify any matters relating to their individual choices.

The guidance team plays a key role in supporting students when choosing programmes, subjects and levels of study. Support is on-going and students are normally interviewed by the guidance counsellors or their year heads about the progress they are making in their chosen subjects. A system of academic mentoring is currently being trialled with the sixth-year students in response to an identified need for individual support and guidance for some students. In addition, following feedback from former students who are now in third-level education, the sixth-year year head and assistant year head are currently designing a support module for sixth-year students, which would look to specifically develop the skills required when making the transition from post-primary to third-level education. Such a worthy initiative should ideally have a co-curricular focus, whereby individual subject teachers would be encouraged to foster skills such as independent learning or research methods as part of the teaching and learning process.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

An extensive range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities fosters positive relationships between all members of the school community. Supporting participation in such activities is in keeping with the school ethos and, apart from the school’s success in
many competitions, the benefits to the students are far-reaching. Not only does it ensure a healthy balance between academic and other pursuits, but activities such as debating develop students communicative and research skills while games such as hockey, tennis, basketball and camogie emphasise the importance of teamwork and the need for on-going commitment.

Music enjoys a particularly high profile in the school. Choirs have long formed part of the school’s tradition. The school has two orchestras and individual music tuition is availed of by over 500 students. In keeping with a long tradition of staging a wide variety of shows, musicals and operettas before the October mid-term break, the *Sound of Music* was being produced with a full house at every performance during the week of the evaluation.

Other co-curricular activities that complement the teaching and learning process include Science Week and the monthly convening of a book club, while fundraising activities organised by the charities committee are a regular feature of school life. The school’s yearbook contains accounts and photographs of each and every event, and is a fitting tribute to all those who contributed to the school’s many and varied activities. Staff and students are commended for their enthusiasm, dynamism and commitment while senior management is commended for its continuous support of such a wide variety of activities.

4. **QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS**

4.1 **Planning and preparation**

The quality of planning and preparation, observed in the subjects and programme inspected as part of the whole school evaluation, was good. Subject co-ordinators are in place and are appointed based on seniority, rotation or sharing arrangements. Management facilitates the convening of faculty meetings at the beginning of the school year. In addition to these, much valuable planning occurs at informal meetings between faculty members and there is clear evidence that communication is collaborative and based on good relationships. Minutes are taken of all formal faculty meetings. It is suggested that the compilation of electronic copies of these records would facilitate their distribution and retention.

Comprehensive subject and programme plans were presented during the evaluation. This documentation outlined long-term planning and contained: subject aims and objectives, planning for students with special educational needs, cross-curricular planning and some references to resources and methodologies. In particular, the TY planning process is commended for its emphasis on planning, review and reflection. As an extension of the good practices observed here, a more formal evaluation towards the end of each year’s programme to include students, teachers and parents should be developed.

While the outcomes of good collaborative planning were evident in most lessons observed, it is recommended that in some instances outline curricular plans be developed into short-term schemes of work that would inform individual planning. Such schemes should reflect a purposeful sequencing of material that is linked to desired learning outcomes. Reference to the key skills students should acquire under each of these sections is also recommended, as is their alignment with appropriate subject-specific methodologies and relevant resources. Faculties are also reminded that all programmes and schemes of work should be working documents that are regularly reviewed.

Many teachers made their individual planning files and other preparation materials available during the evaluation. Documentation reviewed was indicative of careful planning for lessons in line with the content of outline curricular plans. Planning for the individual lessons observed was good and ensured that, overall, students engaged effectively with
lesson content. In a minority of instances however, a need for more definite structuring of lessons to consolidate learning was identified. The practice of promoting active learning through the delivery of a selection of student-centred classroom tasks that develop a range of subject-specific skills is particularly commended.

**4.2 Teaching and learning**

The overall quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was good, with some instances of very good practice. Most lessons were appropriately paced and well structured. In almost all instances, the desired learning outcomes for the lesson were shared with students at the outset. The adoption of this good practice in all lessons would focus both teacher and student attention on the lesson objective and would also facilitate the monitoring of learning by all participants.

Very good teacher-student rapport was noted in lessons. Classroom management was effective and discipline was sensitively maintained. Teachers were affirming of students’ efforts and students were interested and attentive during lessons. The use of differentiated teaching methods in order to meet the learning needs of students is also praised as it was evident that it was helping to ensure that all students experienced success consistent with their ability. Good practice was observed in instances where requests for clarification by students were dealt with immediately and affirmatively.

Teaching methodologies varied considerably. In some instances, the predominant methodology was teacher-directed whole-class teaching which tended to lead to students seeming passive and over-reliant on the teacher for information. In other lessons observed, there were fewer instances of overt teacher input, thus allowing facilitation and guidance of learning. The latter approach saw active participation by students in learning activities, as well as a focus on the development of skills that promoted self-directed and autonomous learning. Exposing students to a wide range of collaborative learning practices should be a feature of all lessons, and more extensive use of student-centred tasks, where appropriate, is strongly encouraged.

Questioning was used to good effect to assess student understanding. Good practice observed included the use of questioning to build on prior knowledge and to introduce new material, thereby advancing learning. Greater use of this approach when introducing a new topic should be considered. The posing of higher-order questions stimulated thought and discussion in many lessons, and its extension into all lessons would further engage students in their own learning. Student responses to questions revealed a thorough grasp of the material being taught and, in some instances, an interest in exploring it further.

A range of resources was used during lessons. These included the whiteboard, printed materials and other resources. Faculties are praised for using resources as a means of supporting students’ learning and are encouraged to maintain this approach. The use of visual stimuli, and written material in the form of handouts, to support student learning is praised, particularly in instances where it enabled the teacher to differentiate learning tasks for students at different ability levels. Visual resources should be utilised to support student learning wherever possible and greater use of ICT is recommended across a number of subject areas.

Students’ written, oral and practical work generally indicated good progress, appropriate to their abilities. Overall, students demonstrated clear understanding and knowledge of the topics under study.

**4.3 Assessment**
The school has both an assessment and a homework policy. Principles advocated in these policies are reflected in classroom practices observed during the evaluation. The use of a number of assessment-related strategies during some lessons gave both teachers and students an indication of the quality of the learning that was taking place. The more extensive use of such strategies is recommended. Homework is assigned and carefully monitored and recorded by teachers. It is suggested that the worthwhile practice of including comments of a formative nature in feedback to students be extended to all subject areas.

Assessment practices at a whole-school level are very good. Students are assessed regularly on completion of topics or themes. Marks attained as part of a process of continuous assessment constitute the Christmas assessment. Formal in-house examinations are held at the end of the year, and certificate-examination classes sit pre-examinations in the spring term. A variety of types of test is administered as appropriate: practical; oral; aural; written and project-based. The inclusion of portfolio assessment in TY is particularly appropriate. Test results are recorded and reported to parents. During the year these results may be communicated using the school journal, or by means of the requirement for a parent signature on class tests. Reports are issued to parents twice yearly and all parents are invited to an annual parent-teacher meeting.

Teachers are very aware of the demands of certificate examinations and share this awareness with their students. Teachers also go to considerable lengths to prepare students for oral and practical examinations. Participation in certificate examinations at higher level is very good. In line with best practice, school management analyses the results obtained in certificate examinations. The overall profile of students’ results is very good when compared with national norms.

5. **Quality of Support for Students**

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

Provision for students with additional educational needs is evident in all aspects of school life and is reflected for example in the use of differentiated teaching and learning strategies in the classroom. This practice stems primarily from the central role played by senior management in formulating an appropriate response to students with additional educational needs. Two members of the learning support department, who act as joint co-ordinators, are responsible for administering and delivering the learning support programme.

The high level of support for students with additional educational needs commences on their enrolment in the school with the administration of general ability tests, correspondence with sixth-class teachers and the convening of individual meetings with all parents. Formal supports are provided on an on-going basis by the special educational needs department, the guidance team, the special needs assistant and the visiting teacher for Travellers. In addition, a strong tradition of informal collaboration with members of the mainstream teaching staff facilitates the identification of students’ needs.

The school’s learning-support policy is currently under review. The existing document is thorough, and indicates a structured and well-organised approach to support provision. The development of individual education plans (IEPs) for every student in receipt of support is worthwhile. Information on the abilities, skills and talents of individual students, as well as teaching and learning strategies that address specific needs, is of particular benefit to mainstream teachers and members of the learning support department are commended for creating documents in a language that is accessible to the non-specialist. The policy review is informed by the professional expertise of the learning-support team, by reflection on
current provision as well as by the Department’s publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs, Post Primary Guidelines*. It is anticipated that the revised policy will make reference to provisions for exceptionally-able students. It is suggested that the revised policy could also include details on whole-school supports such as CPD seminars that have been provided to mainstream teachers. It could also make reference to relevant policies such as enrolment and the code of behaviour, provide guidelines for teachers on how to refer a student for support and outline the nature of parental involvement.

Students with special educational needs have access to the full curriculum. Some junior cycle students, however, may choose to study only one modern language. Mixed-ability classes promote inclusivity, and attribute equal recognition to the unique and individual talents of each student. The use of differentiated teaching strategies ensures that all students experience success consistent with their ability during lessons. The additional provision of individual and group support by members of a designated learning-support team complements the work of the mainstream teacher. The subject-specific expertise of the team is quite varied and enables targeted support for individual students across a broad spectrum of subject areas. The primary model for support remains withdrawal of students for individual and group support. Members of the learning-support team indicated awareness and experience of other forms of support, and are encouraged to remain open to trialling a variety of models, depending on the needs with which students present.

5.2 **Guidance and student support in the whole-school context**

A network of formal and informal support structures provides for students’ personal, educational and vocational needs. These include the guidance department, the special educational needs department and the RE department whose responsibilities include students’ personal, spiritual and moral formation. This work is also supported by a pastoral care structure of year heads and class tutors who work closely with the senior management team.

Owing to the importance attached to supporting the holistic development of each individual student, formulation of a pastoral care policy was one of the first tasks undertaken with the formal establishment of the school development planning process. The original policy has since been reviewed by the teaching staff. The updated document outlines the organisation of pastoral care in the school and, in particular, highlights the role and responsibility of the class tutor in relation to the care of students. This work is supported by a system whereby class tutors teach SPHE to their classes. The recent addition of junior year heads to the structure, however, requires additional amendments to the document and calls for further review. While definite roles and responsibilities exist in the school’s extensive system of support and communication, they are largely informal and would be enhanced by more formal structuring. The whole-school guidance planning process involves such structuring and therefore work done in this area should be advanced. The formation of a small student-support team, as proposed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), would facilitate information sharing. Ideally, this team would be tasked with the development of a whole-school guidance plan. In implementing the above, care should be taken to ensure continuity of supports for students and to maintain the current quality of those supports.

The guidance department comprises two members with extensive links to other staff, the community and the educational and business communities. The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department is used fully and effectively in the provision of Guidance. The facilities for Guidance are very good and include ICT facilities that are well utilised in facilitating students’ access to information, in the administration of the guidance service and in the delivery of the curricular elements of the guidance programme. Positive links
exist between the guidance department and programmes, such as the LCVP. In addition, links to subject departments such as SPHE make possible a whole-school approach to Guidance and a good balance between the curricular and service components of guidance delivery.

Guidance department planning is well developed. An outline of the guidance department programme and the links to the other supports in the school is included in the guidance department plan. Collaboration between the guidance department and the special educational needs department is on-going and substantial. The use of shared individual education plans for students and the documentation of interventions on behalf of students enhance good practice. Similarly, both departments collaborate in the assessment of students prior to entry, and collaborate with colleagues and senior management in arrangements for the smooth transition of in-coming students from primary schools.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s vision, which derives from the teachings of Saint Angela Merici, is clearly articulated in its mission statement and is shared by the whole school community.
- It is evident that positive relationships exist between all members of the school community.
- The work of both the trustees and the board of management makes a meaningful contribution to the management of the school.
- Work on policy formulation is on-going and policies developed are indicative of a high level of collaboration between various members of the school community. All legally-required policies are in place.
- Senior management displays a deep sense of loyalty to the school and its traditions. Their strong work ethic inspires the commitment of staff and students.
- Staff have high expectations of students, particularly with regard to attendance, punctuality and participation.
- The school has a carefully constructed code of behaviour that attributes personal responsibility to staff, students and parents in fostering a positive learning environment.
- The school council provides leadership opportunities for students.
- Effective communication channels with parents exist.
- There are positive relationships between the school and the wider community.
- Self-evaluation and review are embedded in the school’s culture.
- Non-teaching members of staff make a meaningful contribution to school life.
- The fostering of a sense of environmental responsibility is actively promoted.
- A range of subjects and programmes is provided that caters for the varying needs, interests and abilities of students.
- The TY programme is of a very high quality. It has a high profile in the school and is well supported by management.
- Effective arrangements are in place for supporting students when making subject and programme choices.
- An extensive programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities fosters positive relationships and promotes students’ creativity.
- During the evaluation, very good student-teacher rapport was observed and classroom management was found to be effective.
The use of differentiated teaching strategies ensures all students experience success consistent with their ability during lessons.

Students demonstrate clear understanding and knowledge of the topics being studied.

A system of assessment is in place that ensures student progress is carefully monitored and communicated to all relevant parties.

Through the good use of resources such as those for Guidance, there is a high level of support for the personal, vocational and educational needs of all students.

Provision for the spiritual support of students is very good.

Every effort is made to ensure that students with additional educational needs integrate well into the school community. Staff members are committed to supporting these students and are immensely proud of their successes.

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

- The statement in the enrolment policy that appears to exclude students who are not capable of absorbing sixty percent of the curriculum should be removed.
- Key managerial functions should be identified and middle-management duties aligned with them, as appropriate.
- As a means of formalising existing support and communicative structures, and to ensure continuity of quality into the future, work on whole-school guidance planning should be advanced.
- Consensus should be reached on the number of examination subjects that students carry and, if change is decided upon, it should be implemented sooner rather than later.
- Greater use should be made of co-operative learning strategies that would lead to a reduction in teacher-led activities and encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning.
- More widespread use should be made of ICT resources during the teaching and learning process as a means of further stimulating students’ active participation during lessons.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management at which 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 French – 15 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Guidance – 19 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 20 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Music – 21 October 2010
- Programme Evaluation of Transition Year – 21 October 2010

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

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

- BOM initiated process on all recommendations in WSE. 13-04-11.