An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Scoil Aireagail,
Ballyhale, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70570N

Date of inspection: 1 May 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Scoil Aireagail, Ballyhale, Co. Kilkenny was undertaken in May 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in French, Irish and Science were evaluated in detail. An evaluation of the provision of English was also completed in advance of the evaluation. Separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). The four subject inspection reports form part of the evidence base for the whole-school evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Scoil Aireagail is a co-educational, post-primary and continuing-education school run under the auspices of County Kilkenny Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). The school, situated in the south of the county and formerly known as Ballyhale Vocational School, was founded in 1959 and has grown in the intervening years from an initial intake of forty-two students to the current student enrolment of 373.

Having initially offered subjects aimed at the school’s rural student cohort, the curriculum has developed over time allowing the variety of subjects and the diversity of programmes to be expanded. Scoil Aireagail currently offers the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY) and the established Leaving Certificate programmes to its students. In addition to these programmes, Scoil Aireagail offers two Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses as part of its continuing education programme.

Scoil Aireagail has undergone a number of infrastructural changes since its foundation. The most recent of these changes included the completion of phases one and two of the school’s extension in 1994 and 1999 respectively. There are now plans to further extend the school’s existing facilities in order to provide additional accommodation for students and teachers. There have also been significant changes at senior management level with the appointment of a new principal and a new deputy principal in 2008.

Student enrolment has remained relatively constant over the last number of years and the school attracts a number of students from outside its catchment area providing them with significant supports, especially in the area of special educational needs (SEN). While the school is the only provider of second-level education in its catchment area, a number of students also choose to travel to the nearby urban centre of Kilkenny to access their education. The entire school community has placed a considerable emphasis on providing and delivering support structures for students and strives to cater for and assist students in their learning, especially those who require additional educational support.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The ethos of Scoil Aireagail is inclusive, enabling and encouraging. This culture has been developed over a significant period of time and fully permeates all aspects of school life. The school’s educational provision is underpinned by its mission statement which asserts that the school will “provide a holistic education in which each student is valued and their individual needs are recognised and catered for”. The school’s mission is circulated among students and staff in their journals and handbooks and its message is reflected in many of
the school’s policies and practices. It is also evident in the various procedures and interventions that have been developed to support, welcome and care for students of all abilities.

In maintaining this ethos, Scoil Aireagail endeavours to reflect the core values advocated in the County Kilkenny VEC Education Plan; promoting inclusiveness, embracing diversity, community involvement, promoting quality teaching and learning and placing the learner at the centre of all work. Through the dedication and commitment of successive management teams and members of staff many of these goals have been realised and the school is now advancing ways in which to bring about further positive changes. One example of the core values in action is the school’s provision of a specialised autistic-spectrum disorder (ASD) unit so that students with autism can be included in the school community.

It is clear that there is a shared vision among the school community regarding the overall aims of the school. The management and staff of Scoil Aireagail presented as a cohesive group who share common values. These values, many of which are founded in promoting student support and welfare issues, have become embedded in the school’s day-to-day activities and have, over time, become an integral part of the school’s culture. This student-centred approach is commended.

1.2 School ownership and management

The school is managed through an appropriately constituted board of management, which is a sub-committee of County Kilkenny VEC. In fulfilling its role, County Kilkenny VEC, the school’s patron, provides an overarching supportive framework that helps the board to carry out its duties effectively. Examples of some of these supports include the board’s access to a legal advisory service and to a designated health and safety and risk assessment consultancy service. In addition to these supports, County Kilkenny VEC also provides training for staff and VEC nominees to school boards of management within the scheme. To further improve this particular support, the timing of any scheduled training should be reconsidered to ensure that all members, including parents’ nominees, can attend in order to assist them in developing the skills and competencies required to carry out their roles.

The board meets at least five times a year and operates appropriately, preparing formal agendas and maintaining minutes of meetings. All members of the board articulated during the evaluation that they contribute in the decision-making process and that board decisions are made in an open and inclusive manner. The specific expertise and knowledge of individual board members is often used to guide deliberations in order to arrive at the “best possible outcome for the school”. This open and consultative decision-making process is commended.

As part of its remit, the board is particularly involved in specific areas of responsibility such as school buildings and some pertinent school management issues. Examples of priorities currently being progressed at board level include the planned school extension and the school’s application for participation in the Department of Education and Skill’s action plan for educational inclusion: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). The board’s ongoing work to improve and support the school’s development in this regard is commended.

During the course of the evaluation, the board expressed the view that the responsibility for developing and improving teaching and learning in the school is devolved to the senior-management team. It is imperative that the board becomes more pro-active and involved in this key area as it is one of County Kilkenny VECs core organisational values. To work towards achieving this particular goal, the board should ensure that teaching and learning
issues are discussed at board level regularly, and any initiatives resulting from these discussions be directed by the senior management team, particularly in the promotion of specific activities or strategies that could improve teaching and learning in the school. Furthermore, the board should be provided each year with a detailed analysis of the school’s results in the state examinations and an analysis of the destination of its school leavers. Examples of other possible areas for development are outlined in Section 2.1.

Communication between the board and the wider school community varies from formal reports of board meetings to County Kilkenny VEC to informal oral representations on the work of the board made by the principal and parent nominees to the staff and the parents’ association, respectively. Once the role of the parents’ association has been fully defined and embedded in the organisation of the school, it will provide a clear structure for its representative body to communicate more effectively with the board of management.

While certain items discussed at board meetings must remain confidential, it is suggested that the board considers the merits of formulating agreed reports to staff, students and parents after each board meeting. By incorporating the formation of agreed reports into board meetings, the board can be assured that all partners in the school community receive up-to-date information in relation to all salient and relevant school management issues.

The board oversees school policy development and review and it has ratified most of the legally required policies including policies detailing the school’s procedures in relation to admissions, attendance, anti-bullying, and SEN. However it is recommended that the board ratify the existing draft guidance policy. In addition, the board must oversee the development and ratification of a policy on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and the provision of a RSE programme for all students in the school as per circular letter 27/2008.

While the board has an awareness of, and an input into aspects of school development planning, the overall responsibility for the development of the actual school plan has been devolved to the principal. This is a significant responsibility which the principal has undertaken in collaboration with the middle-management team. Through consultation with the team and the wider-school community, a number of additional developmental priorities for the school have been generated. These priorities include a review of the school’s middle-management structures and specific plans for policy review and development. These priorities, combined with the board’s priorities as stated earlier, should form a cohesive strategic plan for the school allowing the board to plan for its development in a structured and sequential manner.

1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team consists of the senior-management team of principal and deputy principal and the middle-management team of six assistant principals and nine special duties teachers.

Both members of the senior-management team in Scoil Aireagail have been recently appointed to their current positions. These appointments have helped to further develop the positive and progressive atmosphere already in the school. Although still in the early stages of their tenure, the senior-management team is developing a collaborative approach to school leadership. The principal and deputy principal are working together to develop a shared vision for the school that will progress the priorities laid down in the school plan. They display clear leadership qualities that have already affected a number of positive changes in the school. Examples of these changes include the reported improvement in student behaviour and the initiation of a number of reviews with the goal of improving the
efficiency and effectiveness of specific school practices, such as the ongoing review of posts of responsibility.

Currently fulfilling a wide range of duties, including teaching, the senior-management team has not had the opportunity to fully define their individual or combined roles. This task should be completed as soon as possible. In doing so, it will be possible to identify areas where direct senior management involvement is not essential thus allowing increased involvement and empowerment of the already highly-motivated middle-management team.

The principal is a longstanding member of the school community and served as both teacher and deputy principal prior to being appointed to the current role in September 2008. This experience has equipped the principal with an extensive knowledge of the systems, personnel and structures in place in Scoil Aireagail. Notwithstanding this significant accumulated knowledge and experience, the principal has identified the area of leadership as a requirement for continuing professional development and has accessed training in this area through the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) Misneach programme. This participation in continuing professional development (CPD), especially at senior management level, is commendable.

The deputy principal brings a variety of new ideas and perspectives to the senior management team. This complementary blend of experiences and viewpoints at senior management level will help to facilitate the development of a strong and cohesive unit that will be in a position to continue to develop the school and to manage the resulting changes effectively.

Senior management has fostered a collaborative approach with the school’s dedicated middle-management team who are fully supportive of senior management and committed to the school. This is evident in the assistant principals’ involvement in school development planning (SDP), through their involvement in policy development sub-groups and their participation in the development of the school plan.

Relevant and appropriate duties are delegated to post-holders according to agreed procedures. Currently, all assistant principals are year heads for specific year groups. In addition to the duties attached to their roles as year heads, the team of assistant principals also undertake the following duties: maintaining the school attendance roll, implementing the school’s book-rental scheme, induction of first-year students and the co-ordination of the SEN structures in the school. The duties attached to the nine special duties teachers’ posts in the school include: organising in-house examinations, designing and maintaining the school’s website, co-ordinating information and communication technology (ICT), co-ordinating school tours and facilitating the mentoring of new teachers.

As part of its initial school review and evaluation, senior management has recently begun to review the current schedule of post duties with a view to ensuring that the delegated responsibilities meet both current and developing curricular, pastoral and administrative needs of the school. This is a most worthwhile undertaking for the senior management team. Once this review has taken place, it may also be beneficial for senior management to annually review posts of responsibility, individually and in combination, in order to ensure that the assigned duties are being completed effectively, that any training or resource implications are identified and that the fulfilment of the roles is carried out in a continually developing and improving manner.

Staff CPD needs have been met through the organisation of a number of whole-staff courses and seminars. These events have been used to progress staff training in specific areas such as differentiation in the classroom and integrating students with Asperger’s syndrome. Individual teachers are facilitated in attending subject specific support-service
courses to develop their skills on an ongoing basis. In addition, ongoing participation in relevant CPD courses specific to SEN provision has led to the development of a specialised and highly qualified SEN core team in the school. Senior management has identified some areas where whole-staff CPD would be beneficial and plans to actively pursue these areas in the future. As a consequence of the findings in section 4 of the report, it is recommended that senior management should source CPD courses aimed specifically at developing more active and experiential teaching and learning methodologies.

A wide variety of policies have been developed to facilitate the effective management of students in the school including student induction, homework, pastoral care, SEN and critical incidents. The school’s admissions policy and enrolment practices reflect its characteristic spirit of openness, inclusion and care. The school makes many efforts to include the diversity of students in all curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

During the course of the evaluation the overall student body was well behaved. Senior management and staff attributed this positive behaviour to the implementation of a number of interim measures that have recently been put in place to achieve an atmosphere throughout the school more conducive to teaching and learning. These efforts and their results are commended. As these interventions have been successful, it is now essential that the entire school community takes the necessary steps to ensure that a revised code of behaviour, founded in promoting good behaviour, is developed in line with the National Educational Welfare Board’s (NEWB) guidelines before September 2010. In revising and developing this code of behaviour all members of the wider school community should be consulted including the school’s patron, staff, parents and students.

A number of years ago, the school made the very positive step of developing a student leadership policy and identified a students’ council as the primary strategy that could be used to achieve the goals listed in this policy. The resulting students’ council has been active in the school for the past seven years. Membership of the current students’ council, however, is imbalanced with the majority of its members representing senior cycle class groups. Efforts should be made to rebalance the student representation in order to ensure that all year groups have proportionate representation. Communication between the class representatives and the general student cohort is informal. This is one area for development and should be reviewed in order to facilitate the improved transfer of relevant information between the students’ council and the entire student body. Some possibilities in this regard could include utilising the students’ council notice board on a more frequent basis and allocating some time to class representatives to report back to the student body periodically, possibly during the weekly class tutor time. A number of areas for development are also highlighted in the student leadership policy including the development of a students’ council constitution and sourcing leadership training for members of the council. These are worthwhile goals and would be beneficial for the further development of the council.

Student attendance is recorded in a systematic and effective manner. The monitoring of student attendance has highlighted that a high level of student absenteeism is prevalent in the school. This is a source of serious concern. The school must immediately prioritise this issue and systematically apply some remedial strategies. The entire school community should work together at improving this situation and develop a whole-school attendance strategy with key measurable objectives that can be closely monitored over a specified period of time. The success of this strategy should then be evaluated and modified periodically if necessary. Some practical examples of school based interventions can be accessed at http://www.newb.ie/downloads/pdf/attendance_report.pdf.

The school’s parents’ association has been reconstituted having been dormant for a number of years. The association is now preparing to develop a more active and involved role in the school. The principal’s attendance at meetings of the parents’ association is an expression
of the value placed on parents’ contributions and on the association’s importance in the organisation of an effective school. Members of the current parents’ association highlighted a number of goals that they wish to achieve during their tenure including: affiliation with the National Parents’ Association for Vocational Schools and Community Colleges (NPAVSCC), preparation of a monthly parents’ newsletter, engagement in formal policy review and development and the organisation of a variety of school fundraising activities. These are worthy goals and should be progressed without delay.

The current procedures for holding parent-teacher meetings in the school are not in line with the Department of Education and Skills circular letter 58/04. School management must address this situation immediately. In planning the new arrangements, consideration should be given to reducing the number of year groups attending each session in order to ensure that teachers have appropriate time to prepare adequately for each class group and that parents receive sufficient focused information pertaining to students’ progress.

The school has established appropriate links with the community to support school activities and programmes. These include the use of community facilities for sporting and cultural activities and also links with local employers who support the school’s work experience programmes. Other links include those made with local support agencies, educational institutions and sporting organisations including the Kilkenny Autism Alliance, the local visiting teacher for the visually impaired (VTVI), Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and Ballyhale Shamrocks GAA club. These mutually beneficial links between the school and the community it serves also include student involvement in local civic programmes such as the renovation of the local ‘Gairdín an Gorta’ and assisting in a nearby hospital for the elderly.

1.4 Management of resources

The school has an official allocation of 31.93 wholetime teacher equivalents (WTE) and is currently operating within this allocation. In utilising this allocation, senior management has ensured that the minimum of twenty-eight hours weekly tuition time has been achieved for all students in line with circular letter M29/95. A review of the school’s timetable, however, indicated that not all permanent whole-time teachers are timetabled for the minimum 18 hours class contact time. In order to maximise the resources at senior management’s disposal, teachers should be optimally deployed up to a maximum of twenty-two hours class contact time where possible. This issue should be addressed immediately.

Senior management has recently initiated a consultation process with staff members in order to ascertain their professional interests and skills. This research will help to provide senior management with considerable flexibility and also allow teachers to be deployed in line with their full range of subject specialisms and qualifications. This activity is commended.

While the majority of the school’s allocation of 7.54 WTEs for SEN provision was accounted for and designated specifically to student supports, a significant amount of this resource is being allocated to supporting the school’s curriculum in an effort to provide students with the widest possible subject choice. While it is worthy to support the curriculum it should not be done with SEN resources. Senior management must ensure that all student support allocations are utilised for the specific benefit of their intended cause. This issue should be rectified immediately.

The support provided for new and existing staff members includes a recently developed staff handbook that details the school’s mission and ethos, administrative responsibilities, student management and support protocols, agreed assessment and reporting procedures,
reporting templates and a number of relevant policy documents including extracts of the school’s child protection guidelines. The school, in collaboration with County Kilkenny VEC, has also developed a mentoring programme to support new teachers. The school’s designated mentor has attended centralised training and meets with new teachers periodically to discuss any pertinent issues. New members of staff expressed their satisfaction with the formal and informal support structures available to them within the school and within their subject departments.

The school’s ancillary staff is made up of the secretary and the caretaker who are appropriately supported by school management in the completion of their assigned duties. The contributions to school life made by the school’s support staff, including their involvement in relevant school policy review and development, are commended.

School management is acutely aware of the accommodation needs of the school and is working towards ensuring that these needs are addressed as a matter of urgency. Priorities for development include the ASD unit, an additional science laboratory and a new staff room. These projects are currently being progressed. To alleviate the shortfall in accommodation a number of temporary pre-fabricated buildings have been erected on a leased site adjacent to the permanent school building. Due to the limitations in the availability of classrooms a number of specialist rooms may be unavailable for certain class groups or used for non-specialist class groups during the course of the week. This can create difficulties in relation to the teaching and learning of specialist subjects and in the preparation of materials, projects and experiments for lessons. Plans to alleviate this problem are due to be progressed through the Department’s Summer Works Scheme (SWS) and once completed this will help to improve the current situation.

The school grounds are well maintained, however some of the older buildings and pre-fabricated buildings present some difficulties in relation to heating, ongoing maintenance and aesthetic upkeep. To address this issue, senior management should identify the areas in need of most remedial work and, in consultation with County Kilkenny VEC, initiate a maintenance programme of the school’s campus on a phased basis.

The school has recently invested in some ICT equipment for use in classrooms to facilitate the inclusion of web-based resources and e-learning software packages in lessons. The school has also developed an ICT policy that mainly comprises an acceptable internet usage policy. The school would benefit from the development of a broader strategy that would look at inventories of software and hardware, maintenance of resources and the identification of future needs. This planning should be pursued with the assistance of Co Kilkenny VECs ICT training and support programme.

County Kilkenny VEC has enlisted a risk assessment consultancy company to carry out safety audits on schools within its scheme. This has resulted in the completion of a comprehensive safety statement and improved safety awareness throughout the school, especially in some practical classrooms. As a result of this audit, a variety of good quality classroom specific safety signs have been commissioned locally and are currently displayed prominently in some classrooms thereby highlighting safety as a prime concern for students and teachers. These initiatives are commended.

The school takes an active role in the Green Schools initiative and has been awarded Green Flags for the past two years in recognition of its environmental awareness. The continued effort in promoting environmental awareness and the maintenance and organisation of various environmental initiatives among students and staff is highly commended.
2. **QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING**

2.1 **The school plan**

Commendably, both the planning process and all policies developed have continually supported the implementation of the mission statement and remained pertinent to the school context. The process of SDP was formally initiated in the school in 2000. Initially, planning focused on developing the school’s mission statement and eventually progressed to school policy development. In 2005, a planning steering committee was formed to develop a formal planning cycle. This steering committee proposed the formation of working groups to progress the formation and review of particular school policies and this system has been in use since then. Progress can now be seen in the key areas undertaken by each working group; for example, the school’s pastoral care policy which has recently undergone a cycle of review, consultation and implementation. To ensure that school policies are up-to-date, the school’s planning steering committee should identify review dates for all policies thus ensuring that school policy review is carried out in an ongoing and cyclical manner.

A comprehensive school plan has been developed in the past year. This plan is divided into permanent and developmental sections, as is best practice. The permanent section includes details of the school’s mission, vision and aims, the school’s history and contextual factors, educational and administrative structures, curriculum provision, key school operational policies and the review and evaluative procedures in the school. The content of this section is of a high standard and its compilation, over a relatively short period of time, is commended. The developmental section of the school plan identifies the perceived factors that affect the school’s further development. In light of these factors, a number of developmental needs have been identified and in some cases action plans have been devised to achieve these goals. This model of action planning is commended.

The principal has retained the responsibility for co-ordinating and facilitating SDP, however this role may be delegated to middle management in light of the proposed review of posts of responsibility. In order to maintain the culture of planning in the school, senior management has facilitated the ongoing professional development of staff members particularly in the area of SDP and in subject department planning. These initiatives are most welcome.

Senior management has successfully fostered a sense of collective ownership of the planning process in its development and in its implementation within the school. This has been achieved through the formation of the steering committee and working groups, and through collaboration with the entire staff in the development of many aspects of the school plan. This collaborative approach is commended.

In recent times, parents have had some input in relation to policy development, such as the current substance misuse policy and a previous version of the school’s code of behaviour. There is now a growing emphasis on the development of a whole-school planning culture through a collaborative approach with the wider-school community. This will be made possible through the increased involvement of the parents’ association and the students’ council. This is a welcome development and is to be encouraged.

During the evaluation, the senior management team expressed their commitment to ongoing review and evaluation of school practices. Some aspects of this self-evaluative process have already been initiated through the involvement of a number of staff members in the development of the school plan and the involvement of the entire teaching staff in the review of the middle-management structures. Self-evaluation can also be seen in the school’s planning process which is based on the review of current practices, the prioritisation of goals and action planning for the implementation of the proposed plan.
This reflective practice has led to the development of clear and identifiable improvements in many specific areas of school life and the development of strategic planning priorities for the school. These achievements, and in particular the self-evaluation practices, are highly commended. Having undertaken this whole-school evaluation, the inspectors recommend that in the next phase of SDP, the whole school should adopt a primary focus for all future developmental work and self-evaluation on the fundamental core area of ‘teaching and learning’. This could be advanced most effectively at subject department level through the utilisation of pedagogical techniques such as assessment for learning (AFL), output-driven subject planning including the identification of learning outcomes, differentiated teaching and learning techniques, peer mentoring and the promotion of active learning techniques. Senior management, in collaboration with the board of management, should lead this planning and identify the most appropriate interventions for Scoil Aireagail and its students. The process should be facilitated by the work of the steering committee. Recommended support in this area is available from the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and on the website www.sdpi.ie.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Skills, September 2004) and that a designated liaison person (DLP) has been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines. However the identity of the designated liaison person in the school was unclear among some members of staff. The board of management must ensure that all elements of the child protection guidelines are adopted and that all members of staff are fully aware of their roles and obligations in relation to child protection issues.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Scoil Aireagail offers the Junior Certificate, TY and Leaving Certificate (Established) programmes to its students and the possibility of extending the senior cycle provision to include the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is due to be examined in the near future. It is important that the viability of all senior cycle programmes, including the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, be fully examined in order to ensure that the most appropriate senior cycle curriculum is made available to the diversity of students.

The TY programme co-ordinator, supported by an assistant TY co-ordinator, effectively manages the delivery of the various elements of the programme. A comprehensive TY plan has been developed that includes individual subject and module plans, details of TY specific events, class lists and timetables for all three TY class groups, a calendar of events and a variety of teacher, parent and student evaluation forms. The TY plan also contains a contract of learning that has been developed to promote a positive learning atmosphere during TY. The quality of this important document is commended.

The TY programme is currently divided into compulsory core activities and a number of optional activities that students may opt for during the course of the year. This selective participation could have a negative effect on the group dynamic and possibly encourage an increased propensity to absenteeism among students. This should be reviewed. Furthermore, the current TY programme includes a significant portion of time spent by students in work experience; students attend work experience one day per week for the whole year. This has the effect of significantly decreasing overall class contact time during the programme. The provision of this amount of work experience is in excess of standard
practice in most schools and should be revised. It is recommended, therefore, that the planning and organisation of TY, relating to the delivery of work experience and the optional aspects of the programme, should be reviewed in order to identify the most suitable, educationally worthwhile and cost-effective model of provision for students.

The school offers a wide range of subjects and levels to accommodate the needs and choices of students and meets Departmental requirements regarding the provision of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The core junior cycle curriculum includes the study of English, Irish, Mathematics, Religious Education (RE), Physical Education (PE), Science, Geography and History. The school’s curriculum also includes many optional subjects including Home Economics, Metalwork, Business Studies, Art and Technical Graphics at junior cycle and Design and Communication Graphics (DCG), Construction Studies, Biology, Chemistry and Accounting at senior cycle. These subjects are suitably diverse in order to ensure that a wide range of students’ skills, needs and aptitudes are catered for. Students have good access to appropriate levels within subjects and school management organises its resources to facilitate this through the concurrent timetabling of core subjects and through the provision of extra class groups for higher and, in some cases, foundation level.

The range of subjects offered to students has recently been reviewed. This has resulted in the introduction of Engineering, Music and Agricultural Science. While these additions are welcome, care should be exercised in curriculum review and development to ensure that additional subjects are self-sustaining and not dependent on student support allocations.

The school week is divided into forty-five class periods that range from thirty-five to forty minutes in duration. In addition to these periods, an additional fifteen minute period is timetabled each Tuesday to allow class tutors meet their assigned groups in order to fulfil their pastoral and academic responsibilities. The majority of subjects receive suitable time allocations allowing both teachers and students appropriate time to complete the various syllabuses. However, there are a small number of shortcomings that should be addressed. School management should examine ways of improving timetable provision for both Irish and English in each year of junior cycle and in TY and address the inconsistencies in relation the time allocated to Physical Education at senior cycle.

The school is conscious of its educational role within the community and has succeeded in forging a number of tangible links with the locality in this regard. These links are evident through the school’s participation in the ‘Log on, Learn’ initiative and the provision of a number of PLC courses. Currently, the school offers two PLC courses to FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) level 5; Hairdressing and Information Technology. The school also offers a number of adult education courses on an annual basis however the uptake of these courses in recent years has been minimal. School management should continue to monitor this situation and examine the possibility of diversifying the types of courses on offer to adults in the community.

### 3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

First-year students take part in a subject sampling programme until Christmas. It was reported during the evaluation, that this helps students to make subsequent choices on the optional subjects based on their aptitudes and experiences of those subjects. Following this sampling period, subject option bands are devised and this is based on a survey of students’ preferences. It was reported that almost all students are allocated their chosen subjects. This method of forming optional subject blocks helps to create an environment where equality of access to subjects is paramount thereby allowing a positive gender balance in many practical subjects to occur. This method of forming optional subject bands is commended.
The vast majority of students in Scoil Aireagail choose to enrol in the school’s TY programme. Participation in the programme has a number of desirable knock-on effects in relation to student maturity, experience and skill acquisition, and also in relation to the development of students’ awareness and understanding of the optional subjects available to them in the school’s Leaving Certificate programme. The TY programme has proved a valuable asset to the school’s curriculum.

A good level of guidance is provided to students and parents at important decision-making times, such as choosing subjects and programmes of study. A number of information sessions are held pre-entry, during first year and prior to entry to senior cycle. Examples include: the guidance counsellor’s visit to feeder primary schools, the use of the school’s promotional DVD to introduce students to the various optional subjects offered in the school, disseminating information packs to students and parents, inviting parents to an open night where optional subjects and programme choices are discussed, an induction day for first-year students and a first-year parents’ night that takes place in early September. The interventions made to familiarise students with the possible subjects and programmes available to them in Scoil Aireagail are commended.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

A wide variety of co-curricular activities is organised in the school to enhance and support learning in many applicable subject areas. Examples of these activities include; a traditional music group, regular participation in local and national art competitions, involvement in the Gaisce award, public speaking events, regular trips to Gaeltacht areas, participation in the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and young social innovator competitions, the weekly computer club and the entire school community’s involvement in the Green Schools initiative.

In addition to the co-curricular activities that occur during the year, a varied extracurricular programme is also maintained in the school. This programme includes sports such as Gaelic games, soccer, basketball, badminton, athletics and equestrian events. The diversity of sporting activities allows almost all students to access some form of activity thereby enhancing their educational experience in Scoil Aireagail.

All activities are co-ordinated through an ‘event planning system’ allowing the effective organisation of out-of-school events. This system helps to ensure that appropriate supervision can be provided for school groups and teams travelling to various events and fixtures. This approach is commended. The provision of such a wide range of activities and the work carried out in delivering the co-curricular and extracurricular programmes for the benefit of the students of Scoil Aireagail is highly commended.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Commendable collaborative subject department planning practices are in place. Subject department planning is ongoing within the context of the school development planning process. The process is appropriately facilitated through formal subject department meetings each term. A subject co-ordinator is in place for each of the subjects evaluated, written plans have been developed, and in addition to formal meetings, regular informal meetings of the teaching teams are also held. In most instances, the role of subject co-ordinator is rotated at agreed intervals and the sharing of this responsibility is commended as good practice. There was evidence of a collaborative approach to planning within the
subject departments and the commitment of the subject teachers to the planning process was commended. Many subject departments maintain minutes of their meetings, which provides a valuable record of the progress being made in the organisation and planning for the delivery of the various programmes of work. Very good liaison between the special educational needs department and the various subject departments was noted.

Subject plans are in place for all subjects inspected and the progress achieved to date was commended by inspectors. Most subject plans identify the aims and objectives for the subject and also list the content to be covered with each year group in addition to the resources, teaching and learning strategies and assessment procedures. It is recommended that, in developing the plans further, these would be cross-referenced in all instances so topics or learning outcomes would be aligned with the most appropriate strategies and resources.

Elements of good practice were identified in some subject departments where teachers have reflected on their practice, and identified the challenges and issues that need to be addressed to advance the quality of learning and teaching in their subject areas. While some good work has been done in developing teaching and learning, this aspect of subject planning should be further developed, with a particular emphasis on sharing and implementing a wider range of teaching methodologies. Specifically, there is a need to provide for more differentiated approaches to teaching and learning to suit the range of learning styles, needs and interests of students. In particular, there should be a greater emphasis in planning for active learning methodologies. Subject departments should differentiate the strategies in their planning documentation, ensuring that the programmes of work are appropriately challenging for all students and develop strategies to improve students’ attainment. The development of strategies to support higher-level should also be considered as part of the subject department planning process.

It is also suggested that subject departments may find it productive to develop medium and long term plans for their subject areas. These may include working with management to improve the level of curricular provision, identifying possible subject-specific classrooms or storage areas and planning for the development and acquisition of resources.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Most lessons observed were clearly presented. The practice of beginning with a recap of previous learning where appropriate was noted and commended in a number of lessons. In some instances, good practice was observed where the topic of the lesson was clearly linked to the intended learning outcomes, which ensured that students had a clear understanding of what they were expected to know and be able to do at the end of the lesson. This practice of sharing not only the topic but also the learning intentions with the class should be adopted in all lessons, as this provides students with a clear focus for their learning and promotes their active engagement.

The teaching and learning methods observed to varying extents in lessons, included direct whole-class instruction by teachers, brainstorming exercises, questioning, pair and group work, student practical work and some various forms of task-based learning. Methods that engaged students directly with the subject matter and actively promoted their participation in the lessons were most effective in promoting learning. With this in mind, all subject departments should make greater use of interactive methods that provide students with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills and should strive to ensure that an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activity is achieved in all lessons. Specifically, and as recommended in Section 4.1, subject departments should prioritise the identification and development of subject-appropriate methods that promote more active and independent learning among students.
Questioning was effectively used in many instances, with some good examples of probing and higher-order questions that involved students in analysis and evaluative judgements.

The pace and inherent challenge of lessons could have been improved in some lessons visited. In some instances, it was felt that higher-level students could have been challenged further and in other instances that some students remained passive during the lesson. This is a source of concern and should be carefully examined across the whole school. Teaching strategies that differentiate for the higher-ability student should be considered by subject teachers. All students should be presented with challenges, activities and questions that are commensurate with their individual ability but also raise standards. Likewise, strategies that encourage student participation should be incorporated into all lessons.

In language classes, best practice was observed when the target language was used and translation was avoided where appropriate. It is recommended that language teachers provide students with additional opportunities, such as short interactive and focused tasks, that promote the use of the target language in lessons. Furthermore, students should be equipped with the language skills of classroom management and inquisitive interaction.

There were some good examples of linking the lesson content to the everyday life experiences of the students, thus making the subject material tangible and more relevant. A range of resources was used to support learning and teaching. The board, worksheets and in some cases, ICT was used to maintain students’ focus on the lesson content. Worksheets were successfully employed in many lessons in the different subject areas to help students engage with the assignments and to support their learning. Teachers are encouraged to expand the use and range of resources, including ICT, where possible. The effectiveness of all resources used should be continuously reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate and supportive in achieving the desired learning outcomes.

The classroom and laboratory environments were well-organised. However, it was expressed that some classrooms would benefit from a greater display of students’ work and subject-specific materials. It is acknowledged that classrooms are student-based and this can often present an obstacle to preserving any subject-specific displays. Nonetheless, teachers should endeavour to create learning environments that promote the development of subject-specific terminology and provide stimulus materials to enhance students’ learning. The display of students’ work often serves to affirm their efforts and engagement, whilst promoting higher quality work.

All subject inspection reports noted effective classroom management. Teacher-student relations were purposeful and mutually respectful and students demonstrated a willingness to co-operate with their peers and their teachers.

4.3 Assessment

Some subject departments have included agreed assessment and homework criteria in their subject plans in line with good practice. In addition to regular end-of-topic tests, students sit formal house examinations at Christmas and in the summer, and examination-year students sit mock examinations in the spring. It was noted that many subject departments are moving towards the use of common examination papers for these key assessments and this is good practice. Furthermore, the inclusion of aural assessments and the planned inclusion of oral assessments of students’ language competency for all year groups are welcomed. Mock examinations for Junior Certificate students are corrected internally by teachers, whilst mock Leaving Certificate papers are corrected externally. There was evidence that good records of students’ attendance, progress and attainment were maintained, and good systems are in place to communicate with parents regarding their child’s progress. Good
practice was noted whereby a second parent-teacher meeting is held in sixth year, which students also attend. In addition, a second parent-teacher meeting for parents of first-year students ensures that they are well informed of how their child is settling into and progressing in secondary school.

Inspectors noted that regular written work was assigned in all the subjects inspected. Students maintain copybooks for all of their written assignments and homework. Some exemplary instances of developmental feedback were noted, with affirmation of students' efforts and clear indications of areas for improvement written into the students’ copybooks. This approach ensures that assessment forms part of the learning process and the extension of this practice is recommended in the case of all substantial assignments. The students’ work inspected reflected varying levels of presentation. While much of the work seen was well presented and provided a useful record for students, there were instances of poor presentation and inadequate recording of work, and this should be addressed. It is suggested that subject departments may consider awarding marks to students for the presentation and layout of their work, which would contribute to their overall grade in the various examinations.

Management conducts a review of student attainment in the state examinations, which is commendable. The uptake of higher level in some subject areas is good. However, it is important that the school continues to develop strategies and practices to improve the uptake of higher level across the curriculum especially in subject areas where student attainment at ordinary level is high. The work of individual teachers who give extra classes and closely monitor students’ homework in an effort to improve student attainment is acknowledged and highly commended.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

Scoil Aireagail’s SEN policy is founded in promoting the inclusion of students with special educational needs in all of the school’s activities. This policy details entrance and transition procedures, timetable planning, programme planning for students with special educational needs, details of how SEN resources are utilised, challenges facing the full inclusion of students with special educational needs in the school and actions plans for the further development of the various support structures. In addition to this policy, a draft ASD unit policy is currently being developed. The development and planned full implementation of both of these detailed policies is commended.

The school has developed a number of strategies to identify students who need additional support, not just those with an assessed SEN. These strategies are implemented in a highly effective and co-ordinated manner. The process begins in January, when sixth-class students are assessed using a variety of standardised cognitive, literacy and numeracy tests. In addition to these, the SEN team seeks to ascertain as much relevant information pertaining to the incoming students as possible. To achieve this, the SEN team meets with the parents of first-year students at the school’s open night, visits and consults with key staff in all primary feeder-schools and also meets the principals and resource teachers from feeder primary schools during students’ first term in the school. These interventions are most beneficial and are highly commended.

The school’s SEN provision is effectively co-ordinated and the SEN core team made up of six teachers and supported by six special needs assistants (SNAs), works collaboratively with subject teachers and management in order to deliver a quality SEN programme for students. The SEN team has accessed appropriate CPD in areas such as dyslexia and ASD,
and specific techniques such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH). The commitment to maintaining and developing professional expertise in areas pertinent to the immediate needs of the student cohort is commended.

The SEN department is well resourced and has full access to two dedicated resource and learning-support rooms. These rooms are appropriately themed with literacy and numeracy motifs and displays. A wide variety of resources has been accumulated over time and these resources are utilised to enhance students’ learning experiences. One example of these resources includes a variety of student-made, themed posters highlighting various topics and subjects. These posters are integrated into resource and learning support lessons in an educationally worthwhile manner promoting literacy and communication skills.

Due to early analysis of the needs for the forthcoming school year by the SEN team, the SEN co-ordinator is in a position to apply for SEN resource allocations in a timely manner. This is most beneficial as it facilitates the planning of the SEN timetable in conjunction with the school’s overall timetable as is best practice.

Withdrawal of students from mainstream lessons for learning support is the general model of provision utilised in the school. Withdrawals are generally on a one-to-one or small group basis. Other forms of teaching support should also be considered. These options could include in-class support through the utilisation of various models of co-operative teaching. The SEN team and school management should investigate the viability and suitability of other modes of delivery within the context of individual students’ needs.

To support the work already carried out by the SEN and learning-support (LS) team through withdrawal, additional CPD in mixed-ability and differentiated teaching methodologies could be sourced. The school benefits from considerable expertise within its SEN and LS department and this should be utilised in the first instance to help mainstream teachers develop their teaching strategies that allow them to cater appropriately for the full diversity of students in their classes, especially in a mixed-ability setting.

The SEN team regularly monitors students’ progress and uses personalised reports for individual students to report this progress to parents at regular intervals. Students’ levels of spelling and reading are tested at the end of first, second and fifth year. Since last year, first-year students are retested in Mathematics to ensure correct placement in second-year class groups. The planning for students with an ASD takes the form of specific targets and objectives set within designated timeframes. These targets are shared with both students and parents allowing them to work together to achieve attainable goals.

A number of inclusive strategies have been developed to ensure that all students identified as having a special educational need are encouraged and facilitated to access and participate in all aspects of school life. One such initiative is the annual equine therapy programme where students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), ASD and mild general learning difficulties are brought to a local equestrian centre to learn horse riding, grooming and maintenance skills. This type of practice aimed at meeting the needs of students with special educational needs is commended.

The SEN department has reacted positively to the arrival of a small number of newcomer students by attending a two-day CPD course in teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) and by acquiring an assessment kit in order to determine the proficiency of newcomer students in the English language. The development of EAL teaching strategies to further facilitate the full integration of these students to the school is to be encouraged.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context
A fully-qualified guidance counsellor co-ordinates and oversees the effective provision of guidance for students in Scoil Aireagail. This support is administered by various key personnel in the school including class teachers, year heads, the SPHE team and subject teachers. In addition to these in-school supports, external agencies, including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), are also utilised to provide relevant counselling and academic supports.

The school receives an ex-quota guidance allocation of 0.59 wholetime teacher equivalents. Currently, Guidance is not timetabled for any class group. While all year groups receive some form of guidance, the allocation is mainly used for individual and group counselling sessions for students in first year and sixth year. These sessions mainly deal with academic counselling in the form of advice relating to subject choices and vocational guidance in the form of information regarding third-level and PLC courses. In addition to this, personal counselling is made available to all students on a referral basis. While it is recognised that the school must work within its resources, some efforts should be made to provide a structured guidance programme for students during TY and fifth year.

A draft guidance plan has been developed and once consultation with representatives of all members of the school community has been completed it will be available for ratification at board level. This plan details the roles and responsibilities of all members of staff involved in delivering the guidance programme in the school and clearly outlines a chronological sequence of guidance-specific events for all year groups.

The school has developed a well-equipped guidance suite that is centrally located and easily accessible to students. Resources include a designated guidance library with on-line facilities that are easily accessible to students.

There is good communication between the guidance counsellor and the senior and middle management teams. This is achieved through the weekly assistant principal meetings and through regular informal discussions with senior management. The guidance counsellor has identified a number of priorities in the draft guidance plan, including a proposal to present an annual report on guidance counselling to the board of management. This would be a worthwhile endeavour. The inclusion of the guidance counsellor’s office phone number in all students’ journals is also a positive method of promoting openness and access for students and parents alike.

A clearly-defined class tutor and year head system has been developed and embedded in the school over time. Most teachers are involved in this system and take particular responsibility for the academic, pastoral and personal development of their specified groups. In addition to meeting their assigned groups on a weekly basis, most class teachers have additional class contact time with their tutor groups. These meetings help to develop a close bond between teachers and their designated class groups. This system helps to further underpin the culture of support for students in the school.

Whilst there is no formal meeting time for a designated care team, student support issues are regularly discussed at the weekly assistant principals’ meeting. This meeting attended by all year heads including the SEN co-ordinator and guidance counsellor, provide the relevant personnel with an opportunity to monitor the well-being of students on an ongoing basis. The need for a designated care team should be continually monitored and if deemed necessary the school should formalise this team’s role in order to maximise its benefits.
6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Scoil Aireagail provides an inclusive, enabling and encouraging environment for all its students.
- The senior-management team displays clear leadership and a commitment to ongoing school improvement.
- The middle-management team contributes in a consultative and collaborative manner assisting senior management through the fulfilment of a wide range of duties.
- The SEN core team, under the direction of the SEN co-ordinator, provide an effective educational support structure for students.
- School development planning is well established and the school has recently developed a comprehensive school plan in order to develop strategies for school improvement.
- The school offers a wide range of subjects and facilitates the formation of class groups to accommodate higher-level, and in some cases foundation-level classes, in order to maximise the benefits incurred by students.
- The school makes every effort to ensure that students and parents are in a position to make fully informed choices about subject and programme options.
- Scoil Aireagail provides a wide range of activities, both co-curricular and extracurricular, to support and enhance students’ learning experiences.

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

- The board of management should assume a more pro-active and involved approach to County Kilkenny VEC’s core organisational value of “promoting quality teaching and learning”.
- Subject departments, supported and facilitated by senior management, should identify and develop subject-appropriate methods that promote more active and independent learning.
- The entire school community should work collaboratively to develop a strategy aimed at improving student attendance rates.
- Senior management must ensure that all student support allocations are utilised for the specific benefit of their intended cause and that the deployment of teaching hours is in line with Department circular letters.
- The board of management must ensure that all elements of the child protection guidelines are adopted and that all members of staff are fully aware of their roles and obligations in relation to child protection issues.
- The planning and organisation of TY, particularly in relation to the delivery of work experience and the optional aspects of the programme, should be reviewed.

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

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of English – 9 February 2009
- Subject Inspection French – 23 April 2009
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, the staff, the parents and students of the school would like to thank the inspectorate for the approach and diligence with which they carried out the evaluation. The Board of Management welcomes the very positive findings contained in the Whole School Evaluation report and the subject inspection reports.

The school partners are encouraged by the fact that the inspectors acknowledge that the needs of students are well catered for in a well maintained school where the environment was found to be extremely warm, welcoming and caring.

The report acknowledges that students have access to a wide range of academic programmes and subjects. It acknowledges also, that the standard of learning and teaching is of a very high quality. It further acknowledges the excellent structures and support given to all students’ academic abilities.

Finally the school also welcomes the inspectorate’s observation of the consultative and collaborative manner that exists in decision making between all members of staff.

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

A consultative process was established last year to examine improving attendance rates.

The findings were

- The numbers attending school were higher than those reported, as the school did not have a late register for students to sign. Thus students were actually in school although some late-comers were being marked absent. Subsequently, a Late Register has been introduced.

- A text alert system is being introduced to notify parents when a student is absent from school.

- This greater accuracy in recording has improved official attendance records by 30% for the year 2009/10

Co. Kilkenny V.E.C. has provided training to all members of the Board Of Management and each member is now fully aware of their roles within the school structure.

Training has been provided to all members of Staff and The Board of management on all aspects of child protection guidelines.