

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Newpark Comprehensive School
Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 81001I

Date of inspection: 23 October 2009



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Newpark Comprehensive School was undertaken in October 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects (see Section 7). An evaluation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was conducted in September 2009, and its findings have contributed to the evidence base for this report. 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

Newpark Comprehensive School was established in 1972 on the site of the former Avoca and Kingstown School and was one of the first Protestant comprehensive schools in the country. Its founding aims were: to make free second-level education available to the Protestant community within an appropriate ethos; to provide educational and recreational facilities for the local community; and to act as a centre for educational innovation. The Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin is the school's patron.

The school is located in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, in an area of mixed private and public housing. It has a specific obligation to the Protestant community of south Dublin and north Wicklow, which is reflected in its admissions policy. Its commitment to social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity is reflected in the admissions policy's recognition of primary schools under the auspices of Educate Together in the same catchment area. Its main feeder primary schools are in south Dublin and are under the patronage of the Church of Ireland or Educate Together.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school's mission statement is prefaced to the prospectus, the student journal and the staff handbook, and is a point of reference in written school policies. It commits the school to developing students' abilities and skills in many spheres; to fostering respect and diversity within the community; and to providing a caring and supportive environment "in which the positive strengths of every person in this school community are developed to the full". The statement is, appropriately, both comprehensive and visionary: for example, it encompasses the development of intellectual, manual and sporting skills, and seeks to "encourage a delight in spiritual, creative and artistic activities".

The mission statement articulates the school's characteristic spirit as reflected in its policies and practices. Respect, partnership and care were identified as the key characteristics of the school by management, students, parents and members of staff, and were evident in many of the interactions observed during the evaluation. The officers of the student council assented unhesitatingly when asked if they were partners in the school, pointing to their active involvement in the development of policies and practices. Parent representatives spoke very highly of the school's caring and inclusive spirit, and endorsed its commitment to social and educational diversity. The wide range of programmes and subjects offered in the school's curriculum, the supports in place for students with special educational needs, and the inclusive structures through which school policy is developed, all demonstrate the

school's fidelity to its mission statement. It is suggested, however, that the mission statement be recast in more succinct form and that the minor variations in wording that appear in different documents be made consistent. The omission of an explicit reference to inclusion in the statement, although it is an implicit value throughout, could be addressed in any rewording of the statement.

1.2 School ownership and management

Revised arrangements for the governance of Protestant comprehensive schools are currently under discussion, and these will clarify issues of trusteeship and the composition, terms of office and role of boards of management. The original articles of management for Protestant comprehensive schools provided for a five-person board of management including three patron nominees. However, in the interests of a broader representation of all stakeholders, the Newpark board has increased its size over the years. The board now has eleven members: six nominees of the patron, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin; the Chief Executive Officer of County Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC); two teacher nominees; and two parent nominees, a father and a mother. The most recent parent nominees have retired from the board on their children's completing school, and are currently being replaced. The principal acts as secretary to the board and the deputy principal attends board meetings by standing invitation.

Many of the patron nominees, including the chairperson, have served on the board for several years. They are strongly committed to the school and have been tenacious and able guardians of its ethos and interests, not least in their support of a broad and balanced curriculum and their efforts to secure a new building. Because the parent and teacher nominees tend to have a shorter period of service, the patron nominees are aware of a perception that they form the 'core' board. However, their commendable commitment to broader representation challenges this perception. In order to maintain the desired board composition into the future, the parent and teacher nominating bodies should promote the importance of representation on the board among their members. The patron body should consider how best to balance continuity and succession with regard to its representation on the board, so as to ensure that the board remains just as strong into the future.

The board meets every month and is assiduous in carrying out its responsibilities. It works closely and very supportively with the senior management team, and the principal and chairperson are in very regular contact. The board takes an active role in the development of policies, as well as their ratification and review. A finance sub-committee reports at each meeting and the board keeps careful oversight of budgetary matters. Board members interview new staff and those applying for posts of responsibility. As the employer of teachers and other staff, the board has had to deal with complex issues arising from employment legislation and has been able to draw on the expertise of board members in this area as well as advice from the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS).

In addition to the conscientious execution of its administrative duties, the board also reflects on its role in providing vision and direction for the school. The board listed six priority areas, other than the new school building, on the information form returned to the evaluation team, and one of these was to improve its communications with other stakeholders. The system of issuing agreed reports of board meetings to staff and parents is satisfactory. Plans to work more closely with the parents' association and the students' council are in train and indicate the board's commitment to partnership. The other priority areas identified by the board all relate to its role in supporting educational provision and leadership. To this end, it meets every few months outside of the regular schedule of meetings and seeks advice and input, as appropriate, from both within and outside the school community. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations in the areas of

curriculum provision and teaching and learning contained in this report will assist the board in its future work. The board is highly commended on its dedication to the school's interests. Its practical support for the school as a learning community is evident in the budgetary provision made for subject department resources and for teachers' professional development.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal form a dedicated and mutually supportive senior management team, which functions at a high level. Both have a visible but low-key presence in the school and have chosen to work from offices that are central and accessible, signalling an open and non-hierarchical management style. They are highly regarded by the teaching staff and the whole school community. They took up their respective roles together in 2006, and both came from within the teaching staff. The principal deals with all Department of Education and Skills and human resource matters, while the deputy principal handles day-to-day issues of student behaviour, and organises the supervision and substitution arrangements. Although they have always worked closely together, they recognised the need for more formal meeting time and this year introduced a Monday morning meeting to prepare for the week's work. They also usually meet on Friday afternoon, and are in constant contact throughout the week. Together they meet each year leader [year head] every week to hear reports and consider issues relating to each year group.

The principal and deputy principal have a shared vision for the school and identified the same areas for development. They wish to maintain and strengthen the school's commitment to comprehensive and inclusive education, meeting the needs of students from the most high-achieving to the most challenged, and they see the furtherance of this aim as a key aspect of their role in educational leadership. Both are committed to the development of a strong middle-management structure to meet the needs of the school and to offer professional development opportunities to the teaching staff, seeing this as an important demonstration of the school's ethos. They have separately attended professional development courses for senior management, and it is suggested that they seek to avail of *Forbairt*, the programme for senior management teams, provided through the Department's Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) programme. Arrangements have recently been put in place for the delegation of senior management duties when the principal and deputy principal are away from the school, and this will facilitate engagement with LDS.

The school has an allocation of eleven assistant principal (AP) posts and sixteen special duties teacher (SDT) posts in 2009/10, with an additional post of programme co-ordinator at AP level, and an additional SDT post arising from the Transition Year (TY) enrolment. The programme co-ordinator post is vacant owing to retirement and four SDT posts are also vacant. The school's current schedule of posts contains certain anomalies, in particular the assigning of the year leader role at both SDT and AP level. In some cases, there is no clear distinction between duties assigned at AP and at SDT level, and some SDT posts carry considerable levels of responsibility. Some AP duties appear as defined tasks rather than areas of responsibility capable of development. However, steps have been taken to address the anomalies and deficits in the schedule and these are discussed below.

In 2008, the senior management team initiated a review of the schedule of posts, which had been largely unchanged since 2001. Following advice on the process from the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), an inventory of the school's needs was carried out, a committee was established and, drawing on its deliberations, the senior management team proposed a revised schedule of posts. The relevant circulars have informed this work. Circular Letter 23/98 gives the rationale for revised in-school management structures as an opportunity for teachers "to assume responsibility in the school for instructional leadership,

curriculum development, the management of staff and their development, and the academic and pastoral work of the school.” The process has been thorough and not unduly lengthy. The proposal to assign the year leader role at AP level only is soundly based, given the responsibility it carries for the management of students. The basis for the proposed assigning of other responsibilities, and for the combining of some duties and the removal of others from the schedule, has been well thought through. It is therefore strongly recommended that school management move to implement the proposed schedule in order to ensure that the allocation of posts is utilised fully to meet identified needs.

Meetings were scheduled to take place during the evaluation with teachers holding posts of responsibility but teachers did not attend them. No evaluative comment on the collective work of these post-holders and its contribution to in-school management can be made.

Very good structures are in place to support the effective management of students. Of particular usefulness are the weekly meetings between the senior management team and each year leader along with the guidance counsellor assigned to that year. Three of these meetings were observed during the evaluation. They give year leaders an opportunity to report, both generally and specifically, on matters of attendance and behaviour and provide a means of communication and co-operation between senior and middle management and the pastoral care team, of which both guidance counsellors are members. Form teachers, whose role is voluntary and of a monitoring and pastoral nature, meet their form groups for five minutes each morning and for twenty minutes on Wednesday. Form time is used to check attendance and students’ journals, and to give students and form teachers an opportunity to exchange information and discuss school-related matters.

Within the school’s liberal Christian ethos, considerable emphasis is placed on fostering positive student behaviour. The disciplinary system includes a measured series of sanctions, but focuses on reparation rather than on blame. Restorative practice has been introduced in a measured and careful manner, most members of staff have received training in the area and a programme of CPD is ongoing. The ladder of referral, the stages in the disciplinary process and the sanctions to be imposed are set out very clearly in the code of behaviour which is included in the student journal and which students and parents agree to abide by. Both parents and students expressed their view that the system is clear and fair. A review of the code is in train and involves consultation with teachers, parents and students. Initiatives such as the homework club, which aims to assist students towards better work habits and attainment, also indicate the school’s emphasis on improvement and positive behaviour. An over-reporting of suspensions to the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) was identified during the evaluation, and the correct procedures have been clarified.

The inspectors observed a meeting of the junior student council, and held meetings with officers of the senior student council, and with a group of prefects including the head boy and head girl. In all instances, the students were most impressive in their sense of responsibility, their reasonable attitude to various school issues, and their sense of partnership with teachers and parents. Both of the student councils have had an input into policy review where appropriate, and have been proactive and practical in their work, for example taking on the painting of the student toilets. Prefects see themselves, and are seen, as student leaders with a role to play in the management and care of students. For instance, they take on monitoring duties during lunchtime and each prefect mentors a number of first year students. The head boy and head girl have a role in managing the prefects’ work, a new dimension introduced this year. Elections to the council and to the prefect body are run in an open and democratic fashion. Some minor adjustments to council election procedures, to avoid over-large groupings and to ensure that all elected members participate, were suggested during the evaluation, and will be considered. It is also recommended that the prefect body include members of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) class who wish to

serve in this capacity. The school council page on the school web site is a promising development.

The parents' association is formally known as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and has its origins in the original Avoca School. The principal and a liaison teacher are members of its committee, while members of the parent body serve as officers. The officers reported a very good level of communication with senior management and teaching staff, and welcomed the strengthening of links with the board of management. The present PTA is clearly very active and engaged, and strongly supports the school's mission statement. At a practical level, the PTA is responsible for funding the school-nurse service, which has a key role in the health and welfare of the school community. The PTA also arranges a number of social events for parents, and is conscious of its role in promoting the inclusion of a very diverse parent body in its activities. It communicates with the parent body as a whole through the school newsletter, in which it now has a regular slot, and it will have a web page on the school's expanding web site. The present committee is all-female; greater involvement of fathers as committee members and PTA activists is to be encouraged.

1.4 Management of resources

The school calendar contains the required number of teaching days, although the number of half days at the beginning of the year may compromise instruction time and should be kept to a minimum. The school timetable comprises twenty-eight hours and five minutes of class-contact time, including a total of forty minutes allocated to form time. A number of form times were observed and were judged to be of instructional benefit to students. However, within the overall school timetable, there is a shortfall in instructional time in respect of fifth and sixth year, arising from an eight-lesson day on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, when all other years have nine lessons. This shortfall must be addressed in next year's timetable, in order to comply with the requirements of the Department's circular letter, M29/95, *Time in School*. The school management may find it helpful to seek external advice on timetabling when addressing this issue and other aspects of curriculum delivery, referred to in Section 3 below.

The school has a total allocation of 68.45 wholetime teacher equivalents (WTEs): 5.64 *ex quota* posts, 43.05 WTEs from ordinary enrolment, and 19.76 concessionary WTEs covering curricular concessions (4.07) and special educational needs (15.69). There are thirty-four permanent wholetime teachers and a similar number of teachers on fixed-term or fixed-purpose contracts, and contracts of indefinite duration. The large number of concessionary posts that must be sought on an annual basis has had some impact on the school's capacity to offer permanent wholetime contracts to teachers. Teachers are deployed in line with their subject specialisms except in a very few instances.

The school grants a time allowance of four hours to teachers with AP posts. However, some teachers with AP posts are teaching below the minimum contracted time of eighteen hours per week. This appears to arise from a restriction placed on these teachers' timetables in the computer programme used for timetabling, and an adjustment will have to be made in order to ensure that contractual obligations are met. The school management should also note that all teachers who are job-sharing, including those who hold AP posts, are required to teach eleven hours per week (see the Department's circular letter 18/98, *Job-sharing scheme for second level teachers*). It is imperative that optimal use be made of the teaching resource allocated to the school.

The school's support staff comprises an office team led by a full-time clerical officer, a librarian, two nurses, and a caretaking staff that works with contract cleaners in maintaining buildings and grounds to a high standard. The clerical officer has significant book-keeping and accounting duties, and liaises with senior management, the board's finance sub-

committee and the PTA. The office team plays an important role in monitoring student attendance and in communications with parents and guardians. Its members reported positively on the school as a busy but happy working environment. The school library is a very well-run and well-used facility. The contribution made by support staff is much appreciated by the school management.

The school accommodation comprises a school block built in 1972; the original Avoca School building; and a number of temporary classrooms. The site also holds a sports centre, which comes within the remit of the school's board of management; pitches used by the school and the Avoca Hockey Club; and a music centre, which is a separate educational institution, with the school principal on its board of directors. The school has a thriving self-financing adult education section, which has contributed to school facilities, notably in the provision of a second computer room. While the accommodation includes valuable amenities such as a swimming pool and a theatre, and considerable efforts have been made to maintain the school in good order, its condition is such as to justify the school's inclusion on the Department's 2009/10 list of building projects to advance to tender and construction. This building project entails the construction of a new school on the site.

Notwithstanding the present shortcomings in accommodation, there are some issues that the school management should now address. The inspection report on Metalwork and Engineering refers to a number of health and safety concerns. These concerns and the recommendation regarding a risk assessment and safety audit should be acted on urgently.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School management evinces a high level of reflective practice and an awareness of the need for forward planning. The senior management team has sought the SDPI's assistance and advice with regard to the development of policies and the strengthening of planning structures within the school, and has found it a valuable support. The assigning of an assistant principal post to the area of school development planning two years ago was a positive step in extending responsibility and leadership in this area to the school's middle management. The post holder has completed the National University of Ireland Galway Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Educational Studies (School Planning) and attends all SDPI in-service for planning co-ordinators. A greater level of formal planning within the in-school management team in recent years is evident in the planning documents that have been collated and were made available during the evaluation.

The school plan begins with a statement of the school's mission and ethos, followed by a reflective and accessible document that poses and answers the question: *What kind of school is Newpark?* Policies contained in the next section of the plan include all statutory policies, with their ratification dates. Some of these, including the admissions policy, have been very recently reviewed. However, the current admissions policy contains no reference to the right to appeal under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998 and should be amended forthwith to rectify this omission. The inclusion in the policy of an indication of the maximum enrolment numbers for second year to sixth year is also advisable. The code of behaviour, known in the school as the positive behaviour policy, is currently being reviewed in the light of the guidelines from the NEWB and the school's introduction of restorative practice. The procedure followed exemplifies the inclusive and consultative approach taken to policy formation in the school in that the board, the teaching staff, parents and students have all had an input.

With regard to the developmental aspect of school planning, needs and priorities are identified by school management and by the teaching staff. Where appropriate, a working group is formed to draft or review a policy, or to consider and make recommendations on school structures and organisation. The review of the schedule of posts provides an instance of this approach. Care should be taken to agree a timeframe for the working groups to present proposals, and to maintain a balance between the required level of consultation and the need to bring policies to completion.

The school is commended on the good practices in place for developing, implementing and reviewing policies. It is suggested that the permanent section of the plan contain current policies only, for ease of reference. An archive file with records of earlier policies can be created if desired, and electronic folders for both permanent and developmental sections of the plan are recommended. A sheet recording the status of policies and the dates of ratification and planned review would be a useful addition to the planning folder.

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

The planning co-ordinator views school self-evaluation as the desired outcome of the school development planning process, and positive steps have been taken to identify and address areas for development. The findings and recommendations contained with regard to curriculum provision and teaching and learning (Sections 3 and 4 of this report) should assist the school in this ongoing process. In this regard, it is helpful that in the current review of posts, academic monitoring has been identified as an adjunct to the planning co-ordinator's role, and that the board has signalled its commitment to supporting teaching and learning. It is recommended that action planning and developmental work focus on issues arising from these sections of the report.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Newpark Comprehensive School offers a commendable range of curricular programmes, including a compulsory TY programme and all three Leaving Certificate programmes. The range of programmes and subjects supports the school's founding mission to offer a broad and balanced education encompassing practical, vocational and academic domains. However, it places complex demands on timetabling. As a general observation, both the number and distribution of lessons in any subject has an impact on its delivery. While the number of lessons allocated was adequate or good, in a number of instances the distribution of lessons was less satisfactory, and a review of the timetable should be undertaken in the short to medium term.

The Junior Certificate programme offered by the school is wide-ranging and well balanced. It comprises eleven core subjects including SPHE and Physical Education (PE), for both of which excellent timetable provision is made, and a modern European language. Lessons in information and communication technology (ICT), drama and choir are delivered on a modular basis. First-year students also choose two optional subjects.

Mixed-ability class groups are established in first year, and are maintained for the three-year cycle in all subject areas with the exception of Mathematics and Irish. The relatively low number of students following the Junior Certificate higher-level syllabus in these subjects was noted in the subject inspections carried out during the evaluation. Subject departments and school management must ensure that they are encouraging students to pursue subjects at the highest appropriate level. With this aim in mind, they should review the basis for class formation and the issue of setting. They should also undertake a comparative analysis of the uptake at higher level for the core Junior Certificate subjects, and act on their findings.

The TY programme is compulsory for all students save in exceptional cases. In line with Department guidelines, the programme comprises core and optional subjects, modular delivery of a wide range of disciplines, and a programme of activities extending beyond the classroom. It is ably co-ordinated by an assistant principal, whose work focuses on the areas outside the academic core, including the valuable extra-mural elements of the programme: work experience, community action, outdoor pursuits and cultural activities. A key aim, supported by a TY student contract, is the development in students of a sense of responsibility for their own work and the input required of them to make it a purposeful year. Students' TY folders seen during the evaluation showed both the wide range of experiences offered and the extent to which students are asked to reflect on these.

The TY calendar is well structured, with each term followed by a week of work experience and a week of themed activities. However, the evaluations of Irish and Mathematics found the core classroom-based element of the TY programme to be less innovative and stimulating than it should be. This finding should be acted on, so that the treatment of the core subjects within the TY programme complements the experiential and skills-focused approach taken in other areas. TY programmes should offer students an opportunity to sample subject areas in order to inform their choices in fifth year. To this end, consideration could be given to increasing the number of core subjects in TY, for example to include Science. This would require changes to the timetable. Possible reallocations of time were discussed with senior management during the evaluation.

Within TY, the established Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), all students take Lifeskills, a valuable programme devised in the school and encompassing areas of social education and personal development, including relationships and sexuality education, and personal and vocational guidance.

Around 75% of the fifth-year cohort takes the established Leaving Certificate. Uptake of the LCVP is modest at around 16% or one class group in each year, and evidence suggests that some students leave the LCVP and continue with the established Leaving Certificate. School management sees great merit in LCVP and would like to see greater uptake. Year leaders and those involved in teaching the link modules manage the co-ordination of LCVP in the school, and there is no LCVP co-ordinator as such. This should be addressed in the interests of raising the profile of LCVP and increasing participation.

Although fewer than 10% of senior cycle students follow the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, there was evidence of its appropriateness to these students' needs and its success in ensuring very good levels of retention, and good attendance and attainment. A temporary arrangement with regard to the co-ordination of LCA is currently in place, as the previous co-ordinator has retired. It is important to ensure that the programme continues to be promoted, and that it continues to cater for the intended cohort of students, as clearly described in the school's admission policy. Student attainment in all aspects of the programme should be carefully monitored, with a view to building on areas of strength and addressing any areas for development that might be indicated.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Information sessions covering subject choice and other aspects of school life are held for incoming first-year students and their parents. Prior to entry, students choose a subject from each of two pre-set option blocks, offering a range of practical, technical and arts subjects. Previous patterns of uptake inform the creation of these option blocks, and staffing, accommodation and timetabling factors may place constraints on the options available. Junior cycle students interviewed expressed general satisfaction with their subject choices, but they and their parents would like to see a taster programme in first year. A taster programme was previously offered but was dropped when the junior cycle curriculum expanded. Its possible reintroduction and the implications for current timetabling arrangements should be studied. Students wishing to change to another subject in the first term are accommodated where possible, and this is commended.

The school has a pilot curricular project, the 'European Section', which is supported by the Department and the French government through the provision of qualified francophone teachers. The programme is an option offered to incoming students with a particular interest or background in French. Students taking this option are placed in a discrete class group and have seven lessons a week dedicated to French language and culture. As a number of the students in the European Section have French as a mother tongue or are very proficient, many possibilities exist for peer tutoring and for methods to maximise the use of the target language. Those involved in planning and delivering the programme are encouraged to explore and use such approaches, while avoiding an over-dependence on direct translation. The involvement of teachers of disciplines such as Home Economics in the European Section is laudable and was seen to work well. The possible delivery of the Lifeskills programme through French in the European Section should be explored, as it would appear to offer an excellent opportunity for content and language integrated learning (CLIL).

Information and advice is available to students and their parents on the range of Leaving Certificate programmes offered, and the choice of the most appropriate programme. Students who have only six Leaving Certificate subjects are encouraged to take LCVP, but its applicability to other students should be more strongly emphasised, especially where parents may not have a clear picture of the programme's scope and purpose. Students and their parents are also informed of the range and nature of the subjects available in fifth year, and the implications of specific subject choices for onward progression are made clear. Irish, English, Mathematics and a modern language are normally compulsory, and students choose three options from a comprehensive range of some eighteen subjects. A 'best fit' model is employed so that the greatest number of students can take their preferred options, and this appears to work very well. Where there are concerns that numbers opting for certain subjects are unduly low, the possibility of sampling within the TY programme to generate greater interest should be explored.

Both mixed-ability class formation and setting according to level are used in fifth and sixth year. Irish, English and Mathematics are timetabled concurrently to facilitate the creation of class groups at a range of levels. While this is in line with good practice, the observations and recommendations previously made with regard to higher-level uptake in the Junior Certificate in Irish and Mathematics equally apply here. The aim of class formation should be to encourage students to learn and attain at the highest possible level. With regard to LCVP-specific timetabling, the link modules are accommodated within the double period allocated to Lifeskills in fifth and sixth year. Students are attaining very good grades in this element of the programme, although this arrangement affects their access to guidance (see Section 5).

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

True to the philosophy of comprehensive education, the school curriculum provides a high level of access to activities that would traditionally be regarded as outside the mainstream, with a strong emphasis on creative artistic pursuits, including drama, music and dance. Some very impressive outcomes of students' engagement in these areas were observed during the evaluation, including the highly competent running of a rehearsal of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* by the assistant director, a senior cycle student. It is suggested that a further dimension to this creative engagement could be provided in the scientific and mathematical areas, for example through participation in the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and the various events organised to enhance and extend students' experience of Mathematics. A high priority is given to fostering the range of students' talents, so activities such as debating and chess are also promoted and supported.

The school offers a wide range of sports, making good use of the fine hockey and swimming facilities on campus, and other amenities nearby. Participation as well as achievement is celebrated, and the school's policy of inclusion also finds expression in this area of school life, for example through celebrating the success of students who have participated in the Special Olympics. The board of management, the PTA and the students themselves expressed great appreciation of the range of additional activities available, and praised the commitment of staff, past pupils and parents that their provision entails.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

The quality of documented planning for the different subjects evaluated ranged from fair to exemplary. All subject departments should ensure that planning remains closely linked to practice, informing the approaches taken to teaching and learning and strengthening collaboration.

Meetings are facilitated for each subject department once a term and minutes of all meetings are kept. This is commended. Practices vary in relation to the co-ordination of different subjects: some posts are voluntary and rotate while others are held either by a senior teacher or a post-holder. Where appropriate, it is recommended that the position of co-ordinator be rotated among all teachers of the subject to promote the development of subject-specific expertise and shared ownership of the subject planning process.

Most of the subject plans reviewed were comprehensive documents outlining aims and objectives for the delivery of the subject, the organisation and operating contexts, the provision of resources and the methodologies used. A need for greater detail concerning proposed methodologies and assessment protocols was indicated in the case of one subject plan, along with further planning for the acquisition and use of resources. Schemes of work for each year group were included in all subject plans. In almost all cases, these conformed to best practice, setting out the desired learning outcomes for the year in terms that reflected the subject syllabus. In one instance, where schemes of work were textbook-driven, it was recommended that they be revised to articulate the learning outcomes set out in the syllabus and to ensure uniform progression in relation to topics studied. Recommendations in some subject areas included planning for greater use of ICT to support teaching and learning. Some subject plans for TY also require revision to ensure that the programme is providing new learning experiences and that teaching and learning progresses purposefully, in accordance with the aims of the TY programme.

There was evidence of good individual preparation and planning for the lessons observed in most subject areas. Equipment and resources needed for the lesson, including overhead

transparencies, worksheets, handouts and other supplementary materials were made ready in advance.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Thirty-eight lessons covering all years, levels and programmes were observed in the course of the five subject inspections that inform this report. The quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from excellent to fair, with particularly good practice identified in one subject area, and considerable scope for development identified in two others.

The good practice of sharing the purpose and outline of the lesson with the students was noted in most lessons, and in many instances these were articulated in terms of the proposed learning outcomes for the lesson. This practice is commended and should be extended. Lessons in all subject areas were generally well structured. In most cases, the content was appropriate to the needs and abilities of the group. However, language teachers should ensure that material selected is appropriate to the age and likely interests of the class group, so that there is optimal engagement with the learning process. In lessons in some subject areas, greater attention to the timing or pace of the lesson was needed to ensure an appropriate conclusion to the lesson and the consolidation of student learning.

The use of the target language as the language of instruction, communication and classroom management was consistently good in one of the languages evaluated. However greater use by the teacher of the target language is recommended in some of the other language lessons observed. Significant efforts were made in all language lessons to give students opportunities to use the target language in class. Where pair and group work was used to this end, it was most successful where the tasks were well structured and purposeful, with clearly defined objectives. In some instances, additional strategies should be introduced to avoid an overdependence on translation. Subject-specific terminology was well used in the subjects where it was relevant.

A variety of methodologies was observed ranging from the traditional whole-class teaching approach in some subject areas to more student-centred experiential learning in others. The development of higher-order skills was facilitated by the questioning strategies used in some subject areas, but other instances were noted where there was a need to engage and challenge students more through greater use of higher-order questions. Tasks in the practical subjects were differentiated to support the mixed-ability nature of the class groupings. The use of differentiated worksheets and tasks should be extended to some of the other subjects evaluated to maximise the learning opportunities for students of all abilities. In general, it is recommended that the range and variety of teaching and learning methods be increased, and that the good practice identified in the subject inspection reports be more widely adopted.

Classroom management was generally good, and inspectors commented on the friendly and supportive learning environment that prevailed. Students had a good understanding of safety procedures in the practical subjects evaluated. However, there were some instances where lessons were managed in a way that resulted in students disengaging from the learning task, for example where demonstrations or explanations were offered to one group of students at a time. Greater consideration of classroom management strategies is recommended to promote a positive work ethic and ongoing student engagement. These could include better task planning; differentiation of tasks; agreed classroom protocols for demonstrations and group work; and the inclusion of all students in the activities of the lesson.

4.3 Assessment

Student progress and achievement is assessed in a variety of ways, including questioning in class, self-assessment, worksheets, practical assignments, homework, class tests and formal examinations. A common homework and assessment policy combining both the practical and theoretical elements of the syllabuses has been devised and is implemented by the teachers of the practical subjects evaluated. This approach is commended. In the case of some of the other subjects evaluated, the subject inspection reports recommend an agreed approach to the formal assessment of student progress including the development of student portfolios, and to the correction of copies. In some instances, the practice of not assigning formal homework or assessment of students' theoretical knowledge until second year needs to be reviewed. In general, all subject departments should be mindful of the benefits of consistent practice in the matter of homework. It is particularly helpful to students when there is consistency both within and between subject departments in this regard.

A review of students' copies indicated variations in the quality and range of homework assignments. Homework assignments were carefully chosen in some lessons to reflect and extend the work of the lesson. However, care is advised in some instances to ensure that the work is sufficiently differentiated to allow all students to have a sense of achievement when completing their homework. Good practice in the correction of homework was noted where constructive comments were included, supplemented in some instances with oral feedback. However, in some subject areas it was very difficult to distinguish between class work and homework assignments in many students' copies. Furthermore it was noted that students did not record homework assignments in their journals consistently. To support good practices in the assignment and correction of homework, teachers should monitor the recording of homework assignments and all corrections should be signed or dated, with a comment included where appropriate. School management has facilitated the delivery of in-service on assessment for learning, which should increasingly inform assessment practices.

Considerable efforts have been made to design a useful journal as a record of work and a means of communication within school and between school and home. It should be fully and consistently used and monitored. Students should also be encouraged to organise their copies and folders in such a way as to facilitate ease of referral at a later date.

Regular end-of-topic or module assessments take place for all year groups in some subjects. In line with best practice, common assessment and marking schemes are used where appropriate. Students sit mid-term tests, class tests at Christmas and formal examinations in the summer. Reports are sent home twice each year. Aural and oral assessments are given to students of languages and project work is assessed in the practical subjects evaluated. This represents very good practice.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

School practice with regard to the inclusion of students with additional educational needs is exemplary. The admissions policy refers explicitly to the school's commitment to including and supporting students with special educational needs within the mainstream, and this was borne out in the systems and practices observed during the evaluation. These have been developed over the years through the concerted efforts of the board, the senior management and the special needs department to organise the accommodation, the teaching resource and the support structures necessary. Instances of commendable practice include the provision of a resource 'home room' for each year, and the delivery of special educational needs support through in-class support in first year so that all students develop a sense of inclusion and identity with their peer group. It is noteworthy that the school acknowledges and affirms diversity in very practical ways. For example, a Lifeskills lesson was observed, involving a diverse group of students who were facilitated to discuss their different abilities

and conditions, learning from each other in a way that underpinned and celebrated the importance of difference.

The Department has granted a resource allocation of 15.69 WTEs to the school in the current year to meet the assessed needs of students. A number of students have an allocation of five hours per week arising from low-incidence conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders. An allocation of nineteen special needs assistants (SNAs) has also been given to the school. These are very sizable allocations and their effective deployment requires vigilance and flexibility, qualities that were evident in the arrangements in place. For example, a blend of one-to-one and small group support is used to teach specific skills and provide an environment in which students can practise them. Also, students requiring a high level of numeracy support are placed in small class groups for Mathematics, using part of the resource allocation. While it is essential that the resource allocation is targeted to meet the needs of individual students, the school should continue to develop its range of models of support, in particular the provision of small group support to provide both subject-specific and socialisation support to students.

Resource planning documentation was made available to the inspection team and meetings were held with the special needs co-ordinator (a post holder) and a group of SNAs. All special needs students are assigned a resource teacher, their 'key worker'. This teacher liaises with the school's learning support professionals, the relevant subject teachers, the SNAs and the individual student's parents or guardians. Educational plans have been prepared for all students with special educational needs, and these focus on the knowledge and skills required by the students to progress through the curriculum, and on the methods likely to prove successful in achieving these outcomes. Effective measures are in place to monitor students' progress, and there was evidence of very good retention rates. The SNAs, many with wide experience of this role, spoke very appreciatively of the high level of organisation within the special educational needs department. The school is highly commended on its structured and professional approach to meeting the special educational needs of students.

The school has an allocation of .55 WTE to support students learning English as an additional language (EAL). This is divided among two teachers with language-teaching experience who share an EAL base room with a good range of EAL resources. In keeping with the school's inclusive approach, EAL students are integrated into mainstream classes, and EAL support is offered where they have timetable gaps. Teacher deployment, resources and the monitoring of students' progress are in line with good practice as set out in Circular Letter 15/09, *Meeting the needs of pupils learning English as an additional language*.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school's guidance allocation is 1.64 WTEs, and this is divided between two qualified guidance counsellors. The guidance and counselling service in the school has seen considerable change in personnel recently, and the present team was established in September 2009. Team members are working together on the development of a whole-school guidance plan, and have identified this as a key priority in consultation with senior management. This work should be progressed as swiftly as possible, and should be regarded as an opportunity to underpin current good practice, and to advance guidance and counselling as a whole-school service.

Guidance is not timetabled in the junior cycle, although the time allocation to SPHE and the comprehensive treatment of the SPHE programme ensure that many areas relevant to guidance are covered. The fact that one of the guidance counsellors co-ordinates SPHE will assist the integration of guidance in the junior cycle into the SPHE programme, in line with recommended practice. Guidance is timetabled in the senior cycle as a component of the

Lifeskills programme. However, LCVP students take their link modules at this time, missing out on these guidance lessons. The guidance service, with senior management, should address this deficiency. Students also have ready access to individual counselling through an appointments system. Aptitude tests are administered to help students choose subjects and identify possible paths of progression. The guidance service takes part in information sessions for parents and students, prior to entry and at times of transition.

Both guidance counsellors are members of the school's pastoral care team, and attend its weekly meetings. Each looks after three year groups, so they also attend the weekly meeting between the respective year leader and senior management as part of their personal guidance remit. They are therefore a significant part of the school's care network, as was clear from both the pastoral care and year leader meetings observed. The structures in place to assist good communication and the sharing of information on specific students were noted as effective and are commended.

The school's student care practice is exemplary. The school has a chaplaincy service, which is provided through an *ex quota* post shared between two teachers, and a school-nurse service, which is funded by the PTA through subscriptions from parents. Meetings with the personnel delivering these services provided evidence of a warm and practical professionalism. The pastoral care team comprises chaplains, nurses and guidance counsellors, bringing together considerable expertise in the care of all students, and particularly of vulnerable students. A meeting of the care team was observed, in which a deep knowledge of students and their circumstances was evident. Members of the team share information among themselves and, where thought necessary, with other members of staff, but they are very attentive to issues of confidentiality and sensitivity. In addition to this, it is commendable that the care team exercises great care with regard to the level of support it can offer to students. Students requiring more specialised support are referred, with parental permission, through senior management to a range of outside agencies with which the school has developed very good links.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is caring and inclusive, and supports social and educational diversity.
- The board of management upholds the school's founding mission and carries out its responsibilities with great dedication.
- The principal and deputy principal form a dedicated and mutually supportive senior management team, which functions at a high level.
- The student councils and prefects have an impressive sense of responsibility, and of partnership with teachers and parents.
- Good practices are in place for developing, implementing and reviewing policies.
- Curricular provision supports the school's founding mission to offer a broad and balanced education encompassing practical, vocational and academic domains.
- School practice with regard to the inclusion of students with additional educational needs and to the pastoral care of students is exemplary.

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

- The proposed revised schedule of posts of responsibility should be put in place.
- All teacher timetables should meet the Department's contractual requirements.
- A review of the school timetable should be undertaken in the short to medium term.

- The recommended adjustments to the TY programme should be implemented.
- Class formation and student placement should be aimed at encouraging students to the highest possible level of attainment.
- The recommendations in the subject inspection reports should be studied carefully and acted on.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal, deputy principal 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 French – 16 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Irish – 22 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 20 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Metalwork and Engineering – 23 October 2009
- Subject Inspection of Social Personal and Health Education – 16 September 2009

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

1. The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the professionalism and courtesy of the Inspectorate in the manner in which the evaluation was carried out.
2. It notes the joint union directive in operation at the time of the evaluation directing staff not to attend pre or post evaluation meetings or scheduled meetings during the time of the evaluation.
3. The Board welcomes the positive affirmation of the school as caring and inclusive. It also notes the acknowledgement of the school's commitment to social and educational diversity.
4. In particular the Board acknowledges
 - The fidelity of the school to its mission statement and ethos through the wide range of programmes offered, the supports in place for students and the inclusive structures through which school policy is developed.
 - Its work in carrying out its role and in providing vision and direction for the school.
 - The very good structures in place to support the effective management of students.
 - The contribution of the Parent Teacher Association and the student council
 - The high level of reflective practice and awareness of the need for forward planning
 - The commendable range of programmes
 - That curricular provision supports the school's founding mission.

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

Follow up actions planned or implemented since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the report.

1. The Mission statement has been amended to include the word 'inclusive'.
2. The Board recognises the need to balance continuity and succession and will discuss this with the Patron.
3. A new safety statement has been put in place.

4. All Assistant Principal positions have been adjusted to meet the 18 hours requirement for 2010/2011.
5. Two additional periods have been allocated to 6th year and one to 5th year in the timetable for 2010/2011.
6. 3 classes have been allocated to higher level in both Maths and Irish in 2nd year.
7. The Admissions policy has been revised in line with the recommendations made.
8. Sampling is now in operation in 1st year up until the mid term.
9. Homework guidelines have been introduced in 1st year and presented to parents.
10. Monthly homework deadlines have been introduced in Senior Cycle.
11. LCVP students receive a number of career guidance lessons in 6th year and these students are also invited to attend lectures from guest speakers during 6th year.
12. The school management in conjunction with the Guidance Department is at present working on a Whole School Guidance Plan.
13. The Board and the school management continue to work on strategies to improve the teaching and learning in the school.