Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Coláiste Chroí Mhuire
An Spidéal, County Galway
Roll number: 63130R

Date of inspection: 22 October 2014
Whole-School Evaluation
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A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October, 2014 in Coláiste Chroí Mhuire. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school’s board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

Coláiste Chroí Mhuire is a co-educational, Irish-medium Gaeltacht school situated in the village of Spiddal. Spiddal is in the Gaeltacht language planning area (LPA) of Cois Fharraige, as provided for in the Gaeltacht Act 2012. The school was founded in 1947 by the Sisters of Mercy and now operates under the trusteeship of Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). Students attending the school come from a large catchment area, from diverse socio-linguistic backgrounds, from Irish medium Gaeltacht primary schools and from English medium primary schools. The current enrolment is 180 students, which represents a fifty-two per cent drop in student numbers since 2007. A review of the educational provision in the LPA of Cois Fharraige was carried out in the summer of 2014. This review examined the possible amalgamation of this school and another school five kilometres away.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management fulfils its role in a very effective manner and has an active role in the development of the school as an Irish-medium centre of learning.
- The senior management team is strongly committed to the school but it needs to focus more closely on key management and leadership responsibilities.
- The duties of middle management are not aligned with the needs of the school in its current context.
- The commitment of staff is a main strength of the school.
- The quality of whole-school communication at a number of levels is inadequate to meet the school’s current needs and to advance improvement across a number of key areas.
- In almost all cases very good quality plans are in place for subjects and programmes.
- In light of the school’s official status as an Irish medium school, the extent to which the language is used in the day-to-day life of the school is inadequate.
- There is a high quality of care for students in keeping with the school’s founding ethos.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good or good in the majority of lessons observed.
• Good progress has been made in implementing recommendations made in previous inspection reports; however, limited progress was noted in relation to recommendations made in relation to whole-school initiatives to support the Irish language.

**Recommendations for Further Development**

• A vision for the future development of the school should be agreed by all stakeholders.
• The roles of the principal and deputy principal should be more clearly defined and strategically linked to the school’s improvement agenda.
• Structures should be put in place to provide for more open communication and consultation within the school.
• Under the leadership of the principal, a robust system of whole-school action planning underpinned by target-setting and ongoing review should be initiated to drive school improvement.
• Posts of responsibility duties should be reviewed and linked to the school’s needs and developmental priorities.
• The organisation and provision for learning support should be devolved to the learning support team.
• Strategies for differentiation should be more widely implemented so that students across the range of language competences, learning styles and abilities are adequately challenged.
• Strategies to equip students to participate more optimally in Irish, the language of the school, throughout their post-primary education should be agreed, implemented and monitored.
• The school’s existing health and safety statement should be revised immediately and extended to include the recently developed facilities.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted and is committed to fulfilling its statutory responsibilities. The board meets regularly, demonstrates a sense of responsibility towards the school and is very supportive of management, staff and students. Communication with all stakeholders is evident. However, there is scope for improvement with regard to providing an agreed written report to the staff and the trustee body and to the level of detail included in the principal’s report to the board. To further strengthen partnership, the board should establish procedures for informing stakeholders of matters in relation to both the operation and the performance of the school.

Although the board was established in 2012 school policies have not come before the board for review and ratification. The majority of school policies have not been reviewed for a number of years and dates of ratification were not evident. It is recommended that a cycle of review and update, involving the parents’ association and the student council, be devised by the board for all policies. The board has a broad overview of the quality of teaching and learning in the school through general reports on certificate examination attainment and updates on subject evaluations provided by the principal. The board should deepen its engagement with the outcomes of examination results and track progress in relation to the recommendations made in inspection reports. It is commendable that the board has led the development of a programme of continuing professional development (CPD) for staff.
The board has identified a number of priorities in a three-year development plan for the period 2013-2016. These include promoting standards in teaching and learning through the provision of training, broadening the extracurricular provision, improving the school’s environmental infrastructure and facilities, improving public relations and developing its use of information and communication technology (ICT) including its administration systems. The board, in consultation with stakeholders, should ensure that there is a shared understanding and unified approach towards achieving the school’s developmental needs for the coming years.

Very good links have been established between the school and the local community. The parents’ association (PA) actively supports many school activities. To further strengthen partnership with parents the PA could make more optimal use of conduits of communication such as the school’s website and newsletter to allow for greater flow of information with the general parent body.

1.2 Leadership for Learning

The two members of the senior management team demonstrate a strong commitment to the school and its continued improvement. They have complementary management styles and undertake a range of duties to support the day-to-day running and administration of the school; including teaching duties. It is recommended that the roles of the principal and deputy principal be more clearly defined and strategically aligned so that they can be more effective in terms of delivering the management and leadership which the school currently needs. This re-alignment should aim to build capacity amongst the middle management team to manage key areas of school life. A redistribution of selected management responsibilities to the deputy principal and other senior staff members would enable the leadership dimension of the principal’s role to be developed in a more proactive manner.

The middle management team comprises four assistant principals and eight special duties teachers. Members of this team show dedication in their work and there is some evidence of distributed leadership in the tasks assigned to their posts of responsibility. A review of the post of responsibility schedule was carried out two years ago. However, the duties attaching to a number of posts do not reflect the school’s current needs or the developmental priorities. A full post review, including the duties of the principal and deputy principal, should be conducted so that the duties could be more specifically defined and closely matched to the school’s developmental priorities and needs. This review should be informed by Circular PPT 29/02, and should provide for equity within and between posts. Meetings between senior management and post holders should also be facilitated on a regular basis. Post holders should provide an annual report on the performance of their duties to senior management and the board.

Declining enrolment is a key concern for the school given its potential impact on teaching resources, the school’s curriculum and its future. A school development committee was established in 2008 to identify initiatives to enhance the school’s profile. Many of the measures initiated are ongoing with positive effects. Currently, whole-school planning is underdeveloped and the school plan lacks a developmental section. It is a matter of urgency that a more formalised and cohesive approach to school improvement planning be established. On this occasion, a formal structure should support school development planning through the formation of task groups, the co-ordination of which should be reflected in the post of responsibility structure.

Notwithstanding the collaboration concerning some areas of school life that currently takes place, more effective communication involving both management and teaching staff is necessary to enable the sharing of key information, adequate discussion and action planning in relation to the main challenges facing the school. The improved management of time at
staff meetings would be a practical and achievable early step in bringing about the change needed.

A key strength of the school is its dedicated and caring staff. Good supports are in place to facilitate staff to attend external CPD and there is very good engagement by individual staff members with personal training. Given such engagement, the practice of sharing in-house expertise as a model of training is recommended, as part of a broader CPD programme.

The Irish language policy of the school has not been updated for some time. The board should arrange that a revision of this policy be carried out as a matter of priority so as to reflect the current linguistic milieu of the school and the local community. The revision of the language policy should include the identification of strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats and a discussion around the collective aspirations of all partners in relation to Irish and the future of the school. An action plan for the language should be devised. This plan must have realistic targets and also seek to agree unified in-school strategies to engage in a realistic and sustained manner with the range of language choices and practices that have now become prevalent in the school. One of the task groups recommended above should focus on this core area of life in the school.

The analysis of certificate examinations is confined to the Leaving Certificate and for the majority of subjects has only been carried out for the past two years. Responsibility for analysing certificate examination results should be devolved to each subject department and the outcomes used to identify an improvement agenda for teaching and learning, and be submitted to senior management.

The maintenance of a broad and balanced curriculum is a key priority, and an ongoing challenge, in the context of declining enrolment and the redeployment of staff. Certain senior cycle subjects have been timetabled for fifth and sixth year students together in recent years. The criteria for identifying subjects to be timetabled in this manner need to be discussed and agreed with staff. A number of circulars and syllabus guidelines are contravened in current timetable provision: shortfalls exist in the time allocated to Mathematics and English in first year, to some optional subjects across the junior cycle and to Link Modules and Physical Education (PE) at senior cycle. These shortfalls should be addressed in the construction of the timetable for the next academic year. First-year students study Irish in one class large group despite a reported quarter of this cohort having poor competence in the language. This should be reviewed to support students to participate more optimally in the immersion context which is central to the school’s ethos. Students’ learning is further enhanced by a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The goodwill and volunteerism of staff is commended in this regard.

The welfare and care of students is a priority of all staff and good structures are in place to support transition from primary and ensure that the care needs of students are supported. These supports were very positively endorsed by parents and students. Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is provided as part of Religious Education (RE) in senior cycle. However, the RSE policy needs to be further developed in line with Circular Letter 37/2010. A care team should be established to ensure linkage between key personnel in line with best practice outlined in the publication Student Support teams in Post-Primary Schools 2014.

The guidance and counselling service is a central support structure for senior cycle students in the school. However, there is a lack of clarity around the provision of guidance in junior cycle. This should be reviewed and the guidance plan should be further developed in a collaborative manner to reflect a whole-school approach to guidance.
Support for students with special educational needs is provided through small class groups and some individual settings. Existing good practices evident in the delivery of these supports include testing in English and Mathematics, prior to entry and in first year, and individual educational plans are being maintained. Standardised testing in Irish had not been carried out at the time of the evaluation and this should be addressed. Re-testing should be introduced to assess progress and the efficacy of interventions. Provision, practices and procedures that are currently in place for students with special education needs in the mainstream setting should be documented so that there is a clear understanding of the operation of the department. An education support team and structures to facilitate a greater level of communication with mainstream teachers should be developed. This would enable planning for individual students’ needs and the tracking of progress to be co-ordinated in an effective manner. Learning plans should also be shared with parents so that they can actively support their children’s progress in learning.

The school’s open admission policy is inclusive in principle and in practice. However, it should include information on the appeals process for parents and students. Overall, the code of behaviour is considered by the school community to be fair, although there is scope to link it with other policies. Procedures governing the ‘sign in-out’ book, currently maintained by the school secretary, should also be reviewed.

Student retention levels are good. The school should undertake an in-depth analysis of non-attendance data and gather baseline information to support target-setting and strategic action planning to address the attendance concerns that were discussed during the evaluation.

A democratically elected and representative student council engages in numerous school activities. However, there is scope to further its role as the voice of the student body. The roles of the officers appointed should be clearly defined and the roles of student leadership in relation to the promotion of Irish should be included.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

1.3 Management of facilities

The school campus is spread across a number of buildings and facilities and the majority of these are upgraded on an ongoing basis. A rolling plan for maintenance and refurbishment should be devised to ensure that all areas of the school be maintained to the same standard. The ICT infrastructure is good and planning for the ongoing enhancement of such facilities, including e-portal, is a priority. The school might also consider participating in An Taisce’s Green-Schools programme.

The existing health and safety statement should be revised immediately and extended to include the new canteen and the recently developed sports areas. This review should be conducted in line with current guidelines and legislation, on an annual basis.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Subject department planning is well advanced, with an overall good standard and some exemplary practices were observed in relation to detailed schemes of work and to review
and target setting for improvement. In some instances literacy strategies are tailored to individual subject plans. In a small number of cases schemes of work need further development to include increased levels of detail on expected learning outcomes, teaching methodologies and specific resources linked to the different topics.

Very good quality teaching and learning was evident in the majority of lessons observed with some exemplary practice noted in many lessons. Scope for development in teaching and learning was also identified in a few lessons during the evaluation.

Best practice in teaching and learning techniques included: very good planning and preparation for lessons; differentiated learning; a comprehensive range of questioning techniques; meaningful links with prior learning; very good modelling of skills centrally by the teacher; a judicious balance between student activity and teacher-led instruction; very good use of ICT and the board; well managed task-based learning and very good facilitation of lesson recapitulation. These very good techniques supported teaching and learning well and should be extended to all lessons where appropriate.

Short-term planning for lessons should seek to differentiate the learning in terms of content, language, resources and outcomes to cater for the range of abilities. Planning for lessons should be mindful of the need to provide students with opportunities to be active in their own learning at stages during the lesson period.

Teachers across a range of subjects demonstrated an awareness of the literacy needs of students in relation to subject-specific terminology. However, attention to students’ numeracy needs was mainly confined to mathematics lessons. Within a whole-school framework, all subject departments should identify and agree their strategies to meet the varying needs of students in relation to both literacy and numeracy.

The high standard of Irish used during all lessons, in the management of students and in communicating with students, is worthy of particular commendation. It is essential that the recommended whole-school review of the school’s Irish policy will provide clear guidelines to build on this very good practice by teachers in relation to the use of Irish.

A random sample of students’ work was reviewed. Good quality monitoring and correction of students’ work was observed. There was some evidence that assessment for learning (AfL) techniques were being employed. It is recommended that AfL principles be used in all subject areas; in particular, the sharing of success criteria for assessment and marking schemes as a way of inculcating the use of peer-assessment and self-assessment should be explored. This should be supported by the development of a whole-school assessment policy

Exemplars of stimulating learning environments were evident in some rooms and along corridors. Efforts should be made to ensure that all classrooms provide a relevant image and print-rich learning environment on an ongoing basis. In all the lessons observed students’ behaviour was very good and teacher-student rapport was very positive.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Almost all recommendations made in recently published reports relating to subject provision have been implemented. However, limited progress has been carried out in
relation to recommendations made about the school’s Irish language policy and the development of a language bridging programme dovetailed to meet the needs of students from diverse language backgrounds.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Very good progress has been achieved in the increased use of a broader range of methodologies, of in-class literacy strategies and the increased participation of students through questioning strategies.

3. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School management and staff are committed to the school and they demonstrate a readiness to engage with progressing the school’s developmental priorities. To harness this goodwill and to bring about effective change and improvement in areas of most need, it is recommended that a much more focused, formalised and progressive approach to whole-school planning be developed, in line with the SSE guidelines. There needs to be strong developmental school leadership and open communication and collaboration among all school partners to drive change and bring about improvement in a unified, effective and sustainable manner.

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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

The board welcomes this report that acknowledges the excellent work of the teaching and learning team. The board commends the references to the very good quality subject and programme plans, the exemplary practice in teaching and learning that was observed, the exemplary quality of the environment in rooms and corridors, the very good relationship that exists between teachers and students and the good work teachers have engaged in in regard to professional development. The board commends the excellent work that is being done in providing students with an extensive range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. It is good that recognition was given to the spirit of volunteerism and good will that exist among teachers in their engagement with this work.

- We are very proud that the good level of student behaviour in the school was commended.
- It is praiseworthy that the report acknowledges the priority given to student care.
- The board is very satisfied in relation to the commendation given to the good work of the parents’ committee and the board itself.
- The board commends the ardent dedication of senior management. The board hopes that new schedule of posts of responsibility will assist senior management to focus on their leadership responsibilities.
- The board welcomes the citation in relation to the high standard of Irish used in all classroom communication and interactions in the lessons observed.

In regard to the discussion about the amalgamation of Coláiste Chroí Mhuire and Coláiste Cholmcille, the board welcomes the decision of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that Coláiste Chroí Mhuire will continue to operate as it is. The Department indicated, in talks with the chief executive officer of CEIST, that favourable consideration would be given to an application for funding from the school.

The board, management, teaching staff and the school community appreciates the challenge associated with the preservation and strengthening of Irish in the school and in the surrounding area. The board is very willing to assist the school and the wider community in this regard.

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

- The board and staff are working on an agreed vision.
- Task groups have been formed to work on different aspects of school life: Irish, refurbishment, publicity, enrolment, curriculum, professional development and self-evaluation.
- After each meeting of the board an agreed report is published on the school’s website and displayed in the staffroom. Information pertaining to the work of the parents’ committee is included in this communication.
- A database of parent e-mail addresses is being compiled to add to communication between the school and the school community.
- A full review of the schedule of posts of responsibility has been carried out (April-May 2015). This schedule will be ratified and published on the school’s website early in the school year 2015/16.
- A review of the school’s health and safety statement has been initiated since 2014.
- A systematic review of school policies is in place: Irish (ongoing), RSE (draft before board May 2015), homework (ratified by the board 19/03/2015).
• Small class groups have been formed in first, second and in third year to focus on students whose fluency in the language is not as good as others in their year groups. Five students is the maximum number in these smaller classes.
• Drumcondra Irish tests have been administered twice to first-year students (November & May) and to second-year students (May) as part of the Irish improvement plan/self-evaluation/planning.
• The board in conjunction with the trustees CEIST and the owners of the school EDUCENA are working on engaging advisers to optimally use the investment that it is hoped the DES will make in the school building and facilities.
• The board, senior management and a task group are in discussion regarding the curricular provision for the next school year.

(This is a translation of the school response submitted by the board of management.)