Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Vincent’s Secondary School
Dundalk, County Louth
Roll number: 63900R

Date of inspection: 27 November 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Vincent’s Secondary School was undertaken in November 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 were evaluated in detail and one subject was evaluated beforehand. Separate reports are available on these subjects (see section 7 for details). 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

St Vincent’s is an all-girls school located in the centre of Dundalk town. The current enrolment is 853 students. It was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1853. The Mercy congregation handed over the stewardship of St Vincent’s to lay management in 1998. The Mercy heritage is still strong and vibrant and the school is proud of its traditions and values. While the ethos of the school is Catholic, it respects the traditions of others and welcomes students from all denominations and backgrounds.

Students attend the school from a wide catchment area including the town of Dundalk and areas of north and mid-Louth, as well as the neighbouring counties. The school also has a small number of international students. The school is proud of that fact that girls from a number of generations of some families have been educated in the school.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

St Vincent’s Secondary School is a welcoming and caring school and this view was shared by all individuals interviewed in the course of the evaluation. The school, as is stated in the mission statement, strives to enable every student to develop her unique potential in an atmosphere of learning and respect, guided by the Mercy philosophy of education. The mission statement is included in school documentation such as the school prospectus and in the introduction to school policies. The school is very proud of its Catholic ethos. Prayer forms a significant part of the school assembly each day and a number of liturgies are held during the year.

The school’s mission statement is reflected in the policies, procedures and day-to-day activities in the school. Parties interviewed said that they hoped that each student leaving St Vincent’s will, during her adult life: derive strength and fulfilment from her faith, continue to work to achieve her potential and be motivated to play an active, caring and responsible role in society. The school encourages the full participation of students in the life of the school through, for example, extracurricular activities and structures such as the student council and the Green Flag committee. The positions of peer mentors, captains, prefects and the opportunities for students to input into school policy formulation and review are further examples of how students are encouraged to play an important role in their school.

1.2 School ownership and management

St Vincent’s Secondary School is under the trusteeship of CEIST – Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust, which provides a moral and legal collaborative trustee framework. The board of management is properly constituted. The current board was established in 2007. The board members have a range of experience and skills and come from educational,
business and professional backgrounds. Appropriate reporting procedures are in place following board meetings. The board affirmed its full confidence in the principal’s direction of the school and it is evident that the board has a very good working relationship with the senior management team of principal and deputy principal.

The board maintains very good links with the school. Members attend school functions and the chairperson maintains a regular and welcome contact with senior management. The board keeps up to date with school issues through regular discussion with the principal. It is praiseworthy that the board has established an on-line library of Departmental circulars, Joint Managerial Body (JMB) bulletins and school policies which all members can access.

Commendably the board members have availed of training opportunities, most recently from CEIST, and from the JMB. CEIST organises training for board members on various aspects of management and school-related issues. The trustee body has also assigned a school-relationships co-ordinator to each school to advise and support school management. This ensures that good links are maintained between the board and the trustees.

It is good practice that the board regularly self-reviews using the Departmental publication “Looking at out School” and this good work is documented in the school plan. The priorities for school development identified by the board include a review of the health and safety policy and the school’s code of behaviour. In terms of curriculum development, the board has promoted the introduction of Spanish. The board is also anxious to ensure that information and communications technology (ICT) is further integrated into the curriculum. Other priorities identified by the board include ensuring access to higher level in every subject for all students in the junior cycle, continuing to improve participation rates at higher level in the certificate examination and at the same time improving overall achievement levels. In addition, as a long-term initiative, they would like to develop the former convent building and the outside playing fields.

1.3 In-school management

The senior management team comprises the principal and the deputy principal, both of whom are long-standing staff members and have worked together over a considerable period of time in the school. They have a partnership approach to school leadership, communicate effectively as a team and show a high level of commitment to the school. They lead by example and place emphasis on getting consensus from all partners. They have demonstrated strong leadership throughout their tenure and most recently their focus has been on bringing about improvements in teaching and learning and in outcomes for students.

The principal and deputy principal consult regularly with each other and share common objectives in the performance of their respective duties. The principal deals with teacher allocations, assigning teachers to classes, supervision and substitution, and attendance, while the deputy principal is involved with timetabling, examinations and attendance. In addition, the principal teaches one class group in the junior cycle. Also, the principal and deputy principal each act as tutor to a sixth-year class groups. The senior management team has a formal timetabled meeting almost every week for which minutes were provided. This time is predominately used to plan for the upcoming events on the school calendar as well as longer-term issues.

Both principal and deputy principal maintain a highly visible profile around the school. They meet students at the front door in the morning and they also monitor the canteen at break time. This hands-on approach keeps them very familiar with the day to day activities of the school. However, there is scope for some of the duties they carry out to be delegated to the middle management team in the school.
The school has twenty-seven posts of responsibility, of which eleven are assistant principal posts and sixteen are at special duties level. Many of the post holders have one major area of responsibility as well as one or more minor areas contained in the school’s schedule of posts. At the end of the school year, post holders compile a report on their duties for the board of management. This is good practice. Post duties were reviewed three years ago. It is commendable that this was carried out by a review committee which included post holders and non-post holders. All members of staff were asked to prioritise duties they considered most appropriate to the needs of the school at that time. At present, senior management has identified some areas for development. This is a timely juncture to review the schedule so it can better support senior management. It is recommended that the schedule of posts be reviewed collectively by the board, senior management and staff to ensure that it is meeting the current and future needs of the school. In such a review, it is important to maintain an equitable balance in workloads and to ensure that the potential of the posts to support senior management is maximised.

Student attendance is monitored systematically and effectively. Teachers take a record of attendance during the first period of the day and during the first period after lunch. These attendance records are collected by the principal and deputy principal. This is an activity which should be incorporated into the post structure in the school. As part of their post of responsibility, three post holders monitor attendance for particular year groups. A printout of student attendance for each year group is distributed to these post holders on a daily basis.

In accordance with legislative requirements, the school has an admissions policy in place. However, it is recommended that this be reviewed to ensure that the criteria for admission to the school are sufficiently clear and prioritised and that the policy conforms to all current legislation.

Clear systems are in place for the management of students and there is a ladder of referral regarding student behaviour in line with the school code of behaviour. The class tutor is currently the first step in this ladder of referral. Tutors teach their class and also meet with them for a tutor period which is held during one class period per month. It is commendable that the timing of this class is rotated so that it does not impact on the same lesson each month. All parties met during the evaluation reported the code of behaviour as clear and fair. There are also clear anti-bullying procedures in the school.

It is praiseworthy that year heads meet as a group on a fortnightly basis to discuss students in their care, and that the senior management team also attends these meetings. Each year group has an assembly one morning per week. This is taken by the principal. Students are notified of upcoming events and of achievements at individual, class and whole school level. Commendations and merit awards are also celebrated at this time. As an opportunity to promote the leadership potential within the year head team, there is scope for this assembly to be shared or alternated between the relevant year head and senior management. Care structures for staff in the school include a dignity in the workplace charter, social committee and a critical incident response plan.

Communication with each of the partners, as well as internal school communication is effective. The principal was praised by teachers, ancillary staff members, and members of parents’ council for her openness towards staff and students and for her ardent interest in the students.

A student council was first set up in 1990 and, after a lapse, it was revitalised in 1998. In line with good practice a liaison teacher was appointed. The student council plays a very active role in the life of the school and in representing the student body. Over the years the
student council has organised events such as talent shows, Christmas entertainments, raffles and fund-raising for various charities. Issues of concern to students are discussed at the monthly meetings and the council has been consulted by management on various matters including school uniform changes, vending-machines and changes in the school’s code of behaviour. It has been consulted on policy development and review particularly in areas such as substance misuse, anti-bullying and homework. The student council also organised an ‘anti-litter’ campaign and from this stemmed the school’s fruitful attempts to obtain the ‘Green Flag. The ‘Green Flag’ committee is now as a separate entity to the student council.

1.4 Management of resources

The school is very well maintained, both inside and out, and the diligence of the ancillary staff is acknowledged and commended. There was a notable absence of litter throughout the school and grounds. Students are also expected to play an active role in maintaining their classrooms. Environmental awareness is encouraged in the students and this is exhibited in the school’s engagement with the Green School programme. It is facilitated by a post holder and commendably, the school has recently achieved a second Green Flag award.

The school has a library and benefits from the services of a part-time librarian. The home economics kitchens and science laboratories have been recently renovated under the Department’s summer works scheme. A new portacabin has been secured for use by the art department as a further classroom. At the time of the evaluation, the windows in a number of areas of the school were being replaced. In addition, the board of management has an application with the planning and building unit of the Department to convert part of the former convent building into an audio-visual room.

The school is compliant with Circular Letter M29/95 Time in School. Teaching staff are deployed consistent with their qualifications and experience. Teachers are given opportunities and encouraged to use their expertise in, for example, special educational needs, transition year (TY) modules and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Teachers generally remain with the same class through the junior cycle and senior cycle and this level of continuity is commendable. Within the majority of subject departments a rotation system is in place for the teaching of higher and ordinary level classes. This is good practice as it builds capacity and expertise within the teams.

Students are assigned to a base classroom for the majority of lessons and move to specialist rooms as timetabled. While it is acknowledged that this acts as a support for students, teachers must bring the resources and materials with them in an attempt to create a subject rich environment. This is an arrangement which should be kept under review, particularly as more classrooms become available.

New teachers are well supported through an induction programme. A copy of the comprehensive staff handbook is provided to all new teachers. Induction is carried out by the principal and new teachers are then linked to a more senior teacher who acts as mentor. This is another area which could be incorporated into the post of responsibility structure in the school.

The continuing professional development (CPD) of staff is supported by both senior management and the board of management. Many members of the teaching staff have furthered their professional development through a variety of post-graduate and in-service courses. The senior management team, in line with good practice, has participated in a number of courses relevant to their management functions. A number of members of the middle-management team have also engaged in role-specific CPD, gaining knowledge and skills to the benefit of the school and students. Individual members of the middle-management team should now investigate role-specific CPD. Whole-staff in-service
training has been addressed during staff training days. The school is very good at sharing the existing expertise on the staff and members are encouraged to provide in-house training on areas in which they have participated in external CPD. In the development of a plan for CPD in the school, an audit of teachers’ CPD needs could be carried out, both in terms of subject-based and generic whole school issues.

Most of the school building is broadband internet enabled. The school has been accepted to participate in a National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) pilot scheme which will provide broadband internet access for the remaining areas of the school. The integration of ICT into teaching and learning was identified as an area for development by senior management. A number of specialist rooms have recently been equipped with interactive white boards and management has plans to increase the number of data projectors available to teachers. There is scope for this development to be addressed in the action planning section of the ICT plan. The storage of ICT equipment is an area which needs to be addressed, particularly as the majority of teachers are not classroom based.

The school has a health and safety statement framed on the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Acts of 2005. Co-ordination of this area is part of an assistant principal’s post in the school. A small number of subject departments have carried out individual risk assessments of their rooms. It is recommended that risk assessments be carried out as part of the planned review and included in the health and safety policy. A scheduled fire drill was held last year and details were recorded. This is good practice. Regular fire evacuations should be held at least one per term. Appropriate health and safety notices are displayed throughout the school building and in specialist rooms.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

A very good culture of collaborative, whole-school planning is evident in the school. The school development planning process was initiated by the board in October 2002. A school development planning co-ordinator was appointed in 2004 and since then many staff members have been very involved in planning groups and committees.

In November 2006 the deputy principal gave a report to the board on school development planning and their progress to date. A synopsis document showing the overview of the school plan was approved by the board. In addition, the board adopted a structured approach to self-review using the “Looking at our School” publication as a guideline.

The current school plan has been delineated into both permanent and developmental sections and this is good practice. The board has developed an action plan to prioritise policies for development and review. In keeping with good practice, the planning synopsis document outlines the date of ratification, date of review and parties consulted in drawing up each of the school policies.

There has been good progress in the area of general school planning as is evidenced by the large number of school policies already in place. A critical incident response plan has recently been ratified by the board and this is to form part of the planned pastoral care policy. The care team cited the drafting of this policy as their next step and this is encouraged. The school’s policy on relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is currently in draft form. The completion of this policy should now be prioritised in line with Circular 0027/2008. Further policies listed in the synopsis document for review include the code of behaviour which includes details on suspension, expulsion and uniform. A policy on numeracy and literacy is in draft form and a draft policy on subject choice has been
developed which is awaiting input from the guidance and special educational needs department. The school also has plans for a policy on assessment and a planning committee has been working on the initial draft.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2004) in May 2005. Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school development planning co-ordinator is now focusing on planning at subject department level. It is good practice that all subject departments have a subject convener and minutes of subject department meetings are recorded. Commendably, a copy of the minutes is also provided to senior management.

3. **QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION**

3.1 **Curriculum planning and organisation**

The school offers a broad and balanced range of programmes and subjects at both junior cycle and senior cycle in the school. It is praiseworthy that Spanish has recently been added to the curriculum in the junior cycle. At senior cycle there are three curricular programmes on offer: the Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Established Leaving Certificate. This reflects the commitment of the school to cater for the range of abilities and needs of its students. It also gives expression to the mission statement of the school.

The TY and LCA programmes are co-ordinated effectively. TY is an optional programme in the school and is very popular; there are four class groups in the current school year. Promotion of the LCA programme, as recommended in the programme evaluation conducted by the Inspectorate in 2007, has resulted in greater numbers of students opting for the programme and there is a class group in both fifth year and sixth year.

In the organisation of classes in the junior cycle, it is praiseworthy that the school has moved from streaming based on general ability to banding. Allocation of students to bands is based on an analysis of the incoming first-year assessment test results and information from the student’s primary school. There are two bands and within each band there are three classes. Students who achieve in the top 50% of the year group are allocated to the first band and the remainder is allocated to the second band. Students are then allocated alphabetically to the classes within the bands. It was reported that all students in both bands have access to higher level in all their subjects. An analysis of the uptake of subjects at higher level in the junior cycle indicates that there has been a marked improvement in the numbers taking higher level in the majority of subject areas over the last four years. While acknowledging this improvement, there is scope for an analysis of subject uptake at higher level in both bands individually to be sure that all students are best placed in the band that they are currently in. This is important to evaluate the effectiveness of the current banding arrangement for all students. Consideration should also be given to the benefits of assigning first year students to mixed ability classes and of establishing bands at a later stage.
The school makes every effort to meet students’ demand for subjects with a low uptake. It is noteworthy that a number of low-uptake subjects are provided on the curriculum for Leaving Certificate.

As part of medium term curriculum planning, the school might consider exploring the potential of adding the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) to the curriculum as a means of giving students more flexibility and to broaden their career choice options.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

A range of measures is in place to provide information and guidance to parents and prospective students when making subject choices. Commendably, these include an open evening, school prospectus and an information booklet for parents. The school guidance counsellors are also available to meet new students and their parents as necessary. Information evenings are also provided at the end of third year for the programmes: TY, LCA and the Leaving Certificate. They are presented by senior management, the guidance counsellors and the programme co-ordinator.

In first year all students study Religious Education, Irish, English, Mathematics, History, Geography, French, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE), Physical Education, Business Studies and Science. In addition, they must choose three of the following five optional subjects: Home Economics, Art, Music, German and Spanish. Since this choice is made before entry to first year, it is difficult to ensure that students are well informed when making this decision. So, it is suggested that this arrangement be reviewed.

In May of first year, students in the first band must drop two of their three optional subjects. Students in the second band have the option of dropping Science and retaining two optional subjects. If a student in the first band wishes to drop Science at the end of first year they are facilitated in taking the second optional subject with students in the second band. In the interests of providing an experience of all the optional subjects for first-year students before they make their choices, the school could now explore the provision a shorter sampling programme for all the optional subjects. This arrangement would have the added benefit of giving all subjects a more equal standing in the school. Another factor to consider in relation to the current arrangement is its impact on the overall class time available for the teaching of subjects in the Junior Certificate programme and the fact that some subjects fall short of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines in that respect.

Members of the parents’ council and student council interviewed during the evaluation indicated that they were happy with both of the quality of advice offered in choosing subjects and of the change-of-option arrangements available in the school. All students are given advice on study skills and examination techniques.

Students from various European countries who wish to prepare for and sit language examinations not provided on the school’s curriculum in the Leaving Certificate are assisted in accessing syllabuses, marking schemes and past papers from the website of the State Examinations Commission.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

An extensive extracurricular and co-curricular programme is available in the school. This includes activities to challenge and develop students, thus increasing their skills, self-confidence, self-esteem and their academic competence. It also gives them an appreciation
of the benefits of knowledge and skill as well as a positive attitude to school and school staff.

A significant number of staff members are committed to these activities which span games and athletics, music, Bridge, Gaisce, quizzes, public speaking and debating as well as involvement with the BT Young Science and Technology Exhibition and Scifest competitions. Some activities take place after school or during lunchtime and involve a wide range of students from first to sixth year. It is of particular note that the school’s bridge team has achieved international success and has represented the school in Turkey at the European championships. Also, at the time of the evaluation, the school orchestra has been invited to perform in Eurodisney.

The provision of such a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities contributes greatly to enabling students to develop both socially and personally and to improve their skills of communication. All of this is in keeping with the sentiments expressed in the mission statement of the school. The staff members involved are commended for their commitment to providing these opportunities for the students.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning is well established in the school and meeting time is allocated four times per year as part of the whole school planning process. Agendas are set for planning meetings and minutes of the meetings are kept within each subject department’s planning documentation. In addition, subject teachers routinely consult on day-to-day issues that arise. In keeping with good practice the position of subject department co-ordinator is rotated amongst members of the relevant teaching team.

Programmes of work, for each year group and level, form part of subject department plans. They are set out in terms of learning objectives, resources and assessment methods. This is very good practice. Some programmes of work are outlined so as to link the learning intention of the lesson to the methodology to be used and this is noteworthy. It is recommended that links between the learning intention and the methodologies to be used be added to all the programmes of work. The programmes would also benefit from the addition of a section for review. Over time, with collaboration, the expansion of the programmes of work in all subject areas should facilitate a very worthwhile sharing of experience and expertise.

Individual lessons were well planned and teachers had prepared all of the necessary resources. In some cases, this involved teachers carrying materials from the storage areas to the classrooms. This is evidence of teachers’ commitment to making lessons interesting and stimulating for students. Many teachers paid good attention to differentiation in the preparation of handouts and worksheets by including, for example, exercises that gradually increased in difficulty. Such practices allow for the variety of ability in each class group and should be extended to all classes.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Generally, the learning intention was shared with students at the outset of the lesson. This is good practice. This gave lessons a clear focus and ensured they were well structured. This clear outline of the lesson also assists the teacher in refining the volume and pitch of the lesson to enable it to progress at a pace which suits the students in the class.
In general, a good balance between teacher input and student activity was achieved as teachers were careful to vary the learning activity regularly throughout lessons. In addition to teacher-led methodologies, teachers used a variety of teaching strategies to engage students in the learning process. These included practical work, pair work and group work. In some of the subjects inspected teachers provide opportunities for students to present their work to their class group. This is most worthwhile practice as it facilitates the development of students’ oral skills and contributes to the development of their self-confidence. It was evident that the variety of methodologies and strategies served to encourage student participation and enjoyment.

In order to develop the good work that is currently taking place, it is recommended that teachers share their experiences with regard to the use of active, student-centred methodologies. This would help to transfer more of the responsibility for learning to the students and enable them to develop their independent learning skills.

In all of the lessons observed, there was a very supportive learning atmosphere and good relationships had been established between students and their teachers. Effective use was made of student affirmation and students’ contributions were warmly welcomed. Classroom management was good and there were some examples of excellent management of students’ learning activities. This has resulted in very high standards of student behaviour and co-operation in all cases.

Teachers made good use of questioning to assess understanding and to involve students in the lesson activities. There was a clear emphasis on developing higher-order thinking skills as students were encouraged to reflect on their knowledge. Through skilful questioning students were challenged to offer explanations to the new ideas and concepts presented in their lessons. These practices also allow students to apply knowledge creatively. Teachers were careful to relate lesson content to students’ personal experience or to current affairs topics. This is valuable as it can provide a means of stimulating interest and establishing a connection between their studies and the outside world. The continued and extended use of this strategy is encouraged.

Teachers have created and use a wide range of appropriate resources and concrete materials. These include well designed worksheets and handouts. It was evident during the classroom visits that the use of ICT in teaching and learning has begun in some subject areas and is well established in others. It is recommended that school’s ICT facilities could be further optimised with a particular emphasis on incorporating ICT in teaching and learning.

Teachers made considerable efforts to enhance their physical working environments with a wide range of commercial and student-generated posters. This is commended as a means of creating a visually stimulating learning environment.

4.3 Assessment

A number of summative assessments take place throughout the year. In-house examinations are held at Christmas for all year groups with the exception of TY. Examinations are held in May for first, second and fifth-year students. TY students are continuously assessed throughout the year. Students preparing for the certificate examinations sit ‘mock’ examinations in spring. Very good practice in relation to differentiation on some subject department examination papers was observed where the questions set take account of the variety in ability levels in the class group. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all in-school examinations. Reports are issued to parents in October, at Christmas, in May and at Easter while parent-teacher meetings are held annually.
Some very good formative assessment practice was evident. Students’ progress is closely monitored by teacher observation and oral questioning in class. Best practice was evident in instances where there was a good balance of open and direct questioning to assess individual levels of student learning. Observation of student work indicated some exemplary practice in the monitoring of some students’ work, where student effort was affirmed and constructive feedback given.

The standard of presentation of the LCA student folders and the quality of their key assignments is high. In one subject inspection report, the inspector praises the reflective practice fostered and formative teacher feedback given to some students in TY and LCA.

The school has a homework policy and homework is set regularly. In reviewing student copybooks, inspectors commented that the standard of presentation of student work is very high. Teachers routinely monitor student work and this contributes to these high standards.

It is very good practice that the school carries out an analysis of student outcomes in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Participation rates at higher level have improved in the majority of subjects and overall levels of attainment are good. Subject departments should continue to carefully monitor participation rates at higher level in comparison with national norms. Positive trends and good practice identified as a result of this reflection should be used to inform planning and extend good practices. When compared with national norms, the high level of performance of students in ordinary level Leaving Certificate Mathematics suggests that greater numbers might be suited to taking the subject at higher level.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The learning-support programme is very well co-ordinated by a post-holder who has a specialist qualification in the area. A learning-support policy has been developed. Commendably, it clearly outlines the methods by which students are identified for support. The roles of those with responsibility for learning support have been included and this is good practice. While it is acknowledged that the policy refers to the inclusive nature of the school it is suggested that, at the next review of the policy, the learning-support department should consider changing the title to a whole school policy on inclusion.

Currently a team of eight teachers is involved in the area of learning support and it is commendable that a number of these teachers hold qualifications in the area. The senior management team, in collaboration with the learning-support co-ordinator, appropriately apportions the learning support and special educational needs allocation of teaching hours granted to the school by the Department.

Identification of students with special educational needs is based on analysis of information which includes: the incoming first-year assessment tests; information from the students’ primary schools; communication with parents and any assessment reports from educational psychologists. Through liaison and discussions among all relevant staff, an individual profile is built up on those who qualify for learning-support and resource teaching. Information is retained on how they are progressing in class, particularly during their first month in the school. This is monitored in first year by the dean of first year. Students’ progress in Mathematics and English in second and third year is monitored by the learning support team. This good practice should be extended to all subject areas so that student progress is closely monitored. A common template for each subject area would be very
helpful and should be developed. This strategy should enable the learning support department to assess the effectiveness of the support being delivered.

Applications for resources to support individual students with special educational needs are made through the local Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO). Individual education plans (IEPs) are developed for each student selected for support. The school is aware of and open to liaising with external agencies, for example, where supplementary assistance is required or where a professional service is involved in provision for a student. Learning support is provided mainly through team teaching and the provision of small groups. In a minority of instances, support is given on a one-to-one basis. Overall, this provision supports the full inclusion of the students.

Information on students with special educational needs is made available to staff as necessary and particular difficulties are brought to the attention of staff at staff meetings or on specific request. Confidential information on individual students is kept in locked filing cabinets. Where necessary, subject teachers can discuss learning strategies for individual students with the learning-support co-ordinator. Commendably, guidelines for the teaching of students with special educational needs and information on general learning disabilities are available in the staff handbook. In line with good practice, the learning-support team has developed a series of booklets on topics such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. These booklets outline appropriate teaching and learning strategies which can be incorporated into lessons in order to include all students.

It is highly commendable that students who are entitled to reasonable accommodation in the certificate examinations (RACE) are provided with the comparable supports during in-house assessments as well. Three special-needs assistants (SNAs) also form part of the learning-support department. They display a dedication to the students in their care and a high awareness of their needs. There is a very good level of interaction between the SNAs and the learning-support co-ordinator. The SNAs also liaise with the subject teachers so as to ensure the effectiveness of the support being provided.

There are two specialist learning-support rooms, each of which has varied displays of stimulating materials, key words and student work. Within the learning-support room there is a bank of resources and support materials, particularly for use with literacy and numeracy. Boxes of resources for specific learning needs have been created and provides clear direction for any member new to the team. It is very good that the learning-support team is in the process of cataloguing the resources.

The school has a number of students from the Traveller community. These students are integrated into all areas of school life and benefit from the supports available to all students in the school. A small number of students who do not have English as their first language are enrolled in the school. They receive support in English as an additional language (EAL) in a small group setting. Support classes are timetabled against Irish, from which these students have exemptions. This is a good use of their time in school, ensuring minimal disruption of their studies. When these students have availed of the two years’ support available from the Department, the school continues to provide support. Currently, students’ proficiency in English is assessed using a combination of interviews, written assignment and consultation with mainstream class teachers. Further information and resources on the assessment of students with EAL is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie). These resources include assessment kits which are available to download.

The school is committed to developing and maintaining a welcoming and respectful environment for newcomer students to ensure that they integrate well in the school. TY students have developed an integration pack for newcomer students including details of
activities inside and out of school. This promises to be a most valuable initiative and will help both students’ confidence and their integration in the school. In order to liaise with the diversity of parents, there is scope for a number of key notices and templates of letters to be translated into the relevant languages. This would provide an extra support for newcomer parents.

A TY group completed a project for Young Social Innovators called ‘It’s Great to Integrate’ and the local Apple Tree Centre hosted one of the cultural evenings. ‘Welcome Packs’ were developed to be distributed to newcomer students and in May 2009, students pitched their project to the ‘Dragons’ Den’ and the money awarded was given to the Apple Tree Foundation to continue their integration programme. Similar events to promote integration of students have been integrated into the work of other programmes for example an Ethnic Cookery Buffet is incorporated into an LCA Tasks. It is also noteworthy that students have organised displays at multicultural exhibitions organised by the local community, for example, the International Food Fair organised by the local parish.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

There is very good provision for guidance and student support in St Vincent’s Secondary School. The school currently is in receipt of an allocation of fifty-five hours per week for guidance from the Department. Two qualified guidance counsellors are allocated forty-four of these hours; a counselling psychologist is allocated approximately four hours per week and the remaining hours are allocated to guidance and counselling activities which are carried out by another member of staff.

Senior cycle students in Transition Year and in the Leaving Certificate programme have timetabled classes for Guidance. They can also avail of individual meetings with the guidance counsellor. Commendably some specific inputs on Guidance, for example, decision making, are planned as part of the SPHE programme for second and third-year students. It is recommended that a better balance of delivery between classroom guidance and one-to-one counselling should be implemented to ensure that all students are provided with guidance activities to assist them in the development of self-management skills and to assist them in connecting the subjects they are studying to their future life choices.

The guidance counsellors support students in the school in the provision of accurate information about subject and programme options. Parents are welcome to meet directly with the guidance counsellor by appointment. Students are referred to the guidance counsellors by members of the student support team, class teachers or they may self-refer. Particular care is taken to assist students who may be experiencing difficulties, and these are offered individual support.

The school’s guidance plan is currently in draft form. It is recommended that the guidance plan be further developed. This process should include input from representatives of students, parents and the local community to ensure that the views of all of the school’s partners are taken into account. Further information on guidance provision in the school can be found in the subject inspection report appended to this report.

Pastoral care is an area of evident strength and the staff considers it a high priority. Parents’ representatives commented on the high quality of care shown to the students as individuals by all staff members

A student support team, established in early 2009, was highly involved in the drafting of the critical incident response plan for the school. This team consists of the principal, deputy principal, the guidance counsellors, year heads, tutors, the learning support co-ordinator and the SPHE co-ordinator. At the end of the year, the team should discuss and review the
frequency of the meetings held by this team so as to ensure that the needs of the students concerned are being met in the best possible way.

As part of the active pastoral care structure in the school a class captain has been appointed to each class in the junior cycle as a liaison between students and teachers. In addition, their role is to nurture class and school spirit. Sixth-year prefects act as mentors to first-year students to help ease their transition into secondary school. Two sixth-year students are elected as head girls by students and staff. Each has responsibility for either the junior or senior school. In addition to their prominent leadership role in the school they also act as a liaison with senior management and are co-opted onto the student council.

Student effort and success is encouraged, acknowledged and affirmed at assemblies, through permanent and temporary photographic displays on corridors and in the foyer, school newsletters, school magazine and the media as well as by individual teachers. The school holds an awards night to acknowledge student participation and achievement. Following input from the parents’ council, amendments have been made to the study skills seminars whereby they will in future be taken by teachers in the school rather than by an external agency. Students are also supported through the provision of subsidised after-school study facilities and a homework club.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The board of management has a very good working relationship with the senior management team in the school.
- The board maintains very good links with the school, members attend school functions as representatives and the chairperson maintains a regular and welcome contact with in-school management.
- The principal and deputy principal have a partnership approach to school leadership; they work most effectively as a team and show a high level of commitment to the school.
- Communication both internally and with each of the school’s partners, takes place regularly and in an effective way.
- The school is very well maintained, both inside and out.
- All parties met during the evaluation reported the code of behaviour as clear and fair.
- New teachers are well supported through an induction programme.
- A very good culture of collaborative, whole-school planning is evident in the school.
- In all of the lessons observed, there was a very supportive learning atmosphere and good relationships had been established between students and their teachers.
- Through skilful questioning students were challenged to offer explanations to the new ideas and concepts presented in their lessons.
- The school is commended for offering students a diverse range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- Pastoral care is an area of evident strength and was a high priority in discussions with staff throughout the evaluation.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that the schedule of posts be reviewed collectively by the board, senior management and staff to ensure that it is meeting the current and future needs of the school.
• The school’s admissions policy should be reviewed so as to ensure that the criteria for admission to the school are sufficiently clear and prioritised and that the policy conforms to all current legislation.
• In the area of planning, it is recommended that links between the learning intention and the methodologies to be used be added to all the programmes of work.
• The school should explore how the use of the ICT facilities available can be optimised with a particular emphasis on incorporating their use into teaching and learning.
• It is recommended that the guidance plan be further developed to ensure that the views of all of the school’s partners are taken into account.

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 Gaeilge – 27 November 2009
• Subject Inspection of Guidance – 23 November 2009
• Subject Inspection of Home Economics – 26 November 2009
• Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 25 November 2009
• Subject Inspection of Religious Education – published March 2009

Published November 2010
Appendix

8. **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 welcomes the very positive findings contained in the WSE report and the Subject Inspection reports.

The WSE report acknowledges that “St Vincent’s is a welcoming and caring school” and that the school’s mission statement emphasising care, respect and joy “is reflected in the policies, procedures and day-to-day activities in the school”. We are very pleased that the report highlights pastoral care as “an area of evident strength” which is given a “high priority” by the staff and that this view was shared by the parents.

The inspectors found that “the school offers a broad and balanced range of programmes and subjects at both junior and senior cycle”. The inspectors acknowledged that this reflects “the commitment of the school to cater for the range of abilities and needs of its students and gives expression to the school mission statement”. We are very pleased that the inspectors commended the high standard of teaching and learning in the school and we are heartened by the findings that lessons were well planned and that a “very supportive learning atmosphere had been established between students and their teachers”. We note that the report found “excellent management of students’ learning activities”, “many examples of good practice” and a “variety of teaching strategies to engage students”. We are particularly pleased that the inspectors found that the “standard of presentation of student work is very high”.

Given that holistic education is prioritised in St. Vincent’s, we feel affirmed that the inspectors note that “an extensive extracurricular and co-curricular programme is available in the school” and that this programme includes many activities that “challenge and develop students”. They also report that “the provision of such a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities contributes greatly to enabling St Vincent’s students to develop both socially and personally and to improve their skills of communication”. The inspectors commended the staff for their “commitment to providing these opportunities”.

The members of the board appreciate that the inspectors have acknowledged their dedication and commitment to their role in the management of St Vincent’s school and they are pleased that the inspectors found that “senior management have a partnership approach, communicate effectively as a team, show a high level of commitment to the school and have demonstrated strong leadership”.

We are glad that the inspectors noted that “the school is very well maintained, both inside and out” and that, deservedly, “the diligence of the ancillary staff is acknowledged and commended”.

We would like to thank the inspectors for their courtesy and professionalism in carrying out this WSE.

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