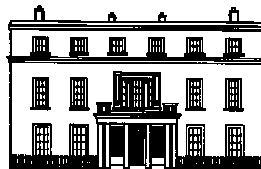


An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's
Navan, County Meath
Roll number: 64370T

Date of inspection: 22 October 2010



A N B 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 Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's Navan was undertaken in October 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in five subjects were evaluated in detail, and 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

Loreto Secondary School, St Michael's, is a Catholic all-girls voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Loreto Education Trust Board. The school has a long tradition of providing a quality holistic education programme and the school community is committed to maintaining and honouring that heritage.

The current school population of 777 students is drawn from a notably large number of feeder primary schools located both in the town of Navan and its wider hinterland. Due to the growth in population of its catchment area, the demand for enrolment has been exceeding places available. This presents significant challenges for the board of management from year to year.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The characteristic spirit of Loreto Secondary School, St. Michael's, is underpinned by the Loreto philosophy of education. In keeping with this philosophy, the school's mission statement underlines the importance of the holistic development of students within a positive learning environment that has a focus on social justice. Efforts are made to build leadership capacity amongst staff and students and to develop a collegial and collaborative school community.

Staff members are highly committed to their work. A commendable focus is placed on a determination to set high aspirations for students and this is reflected in the very good levels of attainment achieved by students in the certificate examinations. A very good emphasis is placed on actively promoting and acknowledging a wide variety of students' contributions and achievements throughout the academic year.

The creation of a happy and safe student-centred environment is recognised as a core value by the school. A respectful, friendly, affirming and warm atmosphere is evident in the school. The work of key personnel such as the guidance team, year heads and tutors, as well as the contributions made by student prefects and peer mediators enthusiastically support the formation of a positive and re-assuring learning environment.

The Loreto Education Trust actively supports the school in upholding the Loreto ethos. To this end a very good level of ongoing advice and training is provided by the patron body to various groups within the school community.

1.2 School ownership and management

The current board of management is properly constituted. The specific expertise and experiences of individual board members are of benefit to the school. There has been a good level of engagement with relevant continuing professional development (CPD) to support the board in fulfilling its managerial and leadership role.

The board adopts a professional and systematic approach to the management of the school. Meetings are held once a month with an agenda and draft minutes circulated in advance of each meeting. The board has a very good working relationship with the senior management team. In keeping with good practice, an agreed report from each board meeting is issued to staff and the parents' association and an annual report on the operation of the school is issued to parents. In the past, the board has met with the parents' association and the students' council. To enhance further the partnership approach to school planning, it is recommended that the board revitalises the practice of meeting with the parents' association and students' council, and to do so annually.

The board demonstrates a very good level of awareness of their role in the strategic leadership and management of the school. The board has developed a strategic plan 2006-2011 for the school, drafted in the main by the principal, to address issues that had arisen at the time. It is recommended that the board should now make arrangements for the collaborative development of the next set of strategic priorities for the period 2012-2017. To reach collaborative agreement on a select number of future development priorities, the board should consider the benefits of carrying out an analysis of the school's strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats (SCOT) in consultation with staff, parents, students and relevant external agencies. This approach would foster a greater sense of shared ownership and shared vision, amongst all stakeholders, for the future development of the school.

The Loreto philosophy in a spirit of inclusivity, seeks to educate all students irrespective of ability, creed or ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. The desire to uphold these values was evident in discussions with the representatives of the trustees and members of the school community during the evaluation. The profile of the current student cohort indicates that it would be prudent for the board, in developing a shared vision, to examine closely its procedures for welcoming and facilitating the application and enrolment of all students within its catchment area. In developing future strategies and priorities, the board is also advised to examine and enhance current practice and procedures in relation to inclusion, as detailed in this report and in the appended subject inspection report of special educational needs (SEN).

The board, with the support of the school's senior management team, facilitates staff members to participate in relevant continuing professional development (CPD). The board is in the process of drafting a CPD policy. Any subsequent CPD action planning should be closely aligned to the development needs of the school. To inform such action planning it is recommended that the board conducts an audit of the staff's professional development needs to highlight gaps and to inform a long-term plan to build the capacity of all teaching staff.

The board submits an annual report to the trustees. The recently revised template provided by the trustees to inform the drafting of this report provides for a good level of self-evaluation and strategic review. A subsequent visit from the education officer attached to the Loreto Education Trust is organised to discuss matters that may arise. These good practices support the culture of self-evaluation and school improvement that is evident in the school.

1.3 In-school management

Both members of the senior management team have a long-standing association with the school. The principal and deputy principal operate as an effective and competent management team. They display a strong sense of loyalty to the staff and share a desire to ensure that the school continues to be a student-centred holistic learning environment. The visionary leadership qualities of the principal were recognised as a key strength by many members of the school community during the evaluation, a view borne out by the significant progress made in the area of school development planning. Reflective practice is evident in the work of the team and it is particularly commendable that the deputy principal and principal are active participants in the recently-established self-evaluation group in the school.

The respective roles of the principal and deputy principal are clearly defined, and very good structures are in place to facilitate communication between the principal and deputy principal. Their division of work has been primarily based on custom and practice. The deputy principal, who also undertakes a small teaching workload, carries out all aspects of the role in a very organised and student-centred manner. Some additional duties have also been taken on by the senior management team to redress gaps that have arisen at middle management level. There is a need to examine the sustainability of the current division of the workload.

The senior management team is supported in the operation of the school by a team of six assistant principals and thirteen special-duties teachers. Post-holders are committed to their work and demonstrate a good level of flexibility in taking on revised duties. Systematic procedures are in place for reviewing and agreeing the schedule of posts on an annual basis with very good collaborative practice evident. One planning priority identified by the principal during the evaluation was the further development of an identifiable in-school management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal and post-holders. This is a necessary pre-requisite to further enhance distributed leadership practices and to build capacity amongst the teachers.

The last major review of posts was carried out in 2009. A review of the current post schedule indicated that gaps are apparent, particularly in the areas of co-ordinating supports for students who have additional educational or welfare needs. Some of the posts are very limited in scope while others carry a significant work load. It is recommended that, in the next major review, a re-configuration of the post schedule be carried out with specific reference to the school's mission statement and the strategic priorities agreed for the school. This re-configuration should be led by the board in co-operation with the principal and involve all relevant partners within the school community. This review should result in the creation of a middle management team whose members have clearly identifiable leadership and management roles in the school.

In the context of the post review, some of the duties currently held by the senior management team should be more widely distributed. It is recommended that some of the specific responsibilities in the areas of school administration, curriculum organisation and student support that the principal currently holds be re-assigned and should be delegated to the relevant post-holder or staff member who is dealing directly with the area. For example, part of the responsibility for liaising with outside agencies such as the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), the Visiting Teacher Services, and the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) and feeder schools should be delegated to relevant staff members. This is a necessary step to give staff members a greater role in the operation of the school and real responsibility for the many and varied duties required. It would also provide the principal with the time necessary for leading strategic development into the future.

As a means of further enhancing middle management structures, a forum, whereby special-duties teachers could meet in plenary session with the senior management team, should also be considered.

Both the principal and deputy principal have engaged individually with a wide range of relevant CPD. Some post-holders have also accessed CPD to support them in carrying out their duties. This is very good practice. It is intended that the principal and the deputy principal will access CPD as a team. The *Forbairt* initiative for established principals and deputy principals organised by the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) programme might prove useful. Further details are available on the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers www.pdst.ie

Good communications systems, both formal and informal, exist between senior management and the teaching staff. The school intranet, a variety of dedicated staff-room notice boards and informal break-time announcements keep staff informed of relevant issues. The effectiveness of staff meetings as a forum to progress school issues was praised by staff during the evaluation. General information is distributed at the beginning of year through the staff handbook. It is suggested that the revised schedule of posts be included in the staff handbook.

The admissions policy is regularly reviewed by the board. While the policy supports inclusion in principle, some adjustments are needed. The admissions policy and associated enrolment forms should be reviewed to ensure that they are framed in a language that encourages parents of all eligible students to enrol in the school. It is recommended that the board reviews and amends in particular those aspects of the policy referring to applicants with additional educational needs, so as to avoid unintentionally precluding or placing barriers in the way of parents enrolling students who may have specific educational or support needs. The information being sought from parents on the initial enrolment form also merits attention. Some of the information could inadvertently prevent some parents from fully completing the form thus making their application void.

Given the notably large number of schools listed as feeder schools, the criteria for the allocation of places merit further refinement. Furthermore, the procedures for enrolling students who wish to transfer from other schools, as well as how access to Transition Year (TY) is determined in the event of over-subscription, should also be included.

School management faces ongoing challenges as a result of an over demand for school places. In this instance, the policy provides for a process of random selection. It is recommended that a person of repute, who is not directly linked with the school community, oversees the random selection process. It is inadvisable to have students, who are minors, involved in this process.

High priority is given to ensuring that students and staff work in a safe and affirming learning environment. Student movement around the school is well ordered and an atmosphere of mutual respect and care underpinned teacher-student and student-student interactions noted by the inspectors during the evaluation. The implementation of school policies such as the code of behaviour, anti-bullying and child protection guidelines actively support the effective management and care of students.

The year head and class tutor system plays an integral role in the management of students. A weekly year head meeting facilitates systematic planning for students' needs. This is good practice. The TY co-ordinator in their capacity as TY year head should also attend these meetings. In the context of a re-organised in-school management structure, it is recommended that role of year head be further developed and be given more clearly defined areas of responsibility. Relevant CPD should be accessed to support this process. As

resources allow, all year-head offices should be appropriately equipped to enable each year head carry out their revised duties.

In 2009, very good use was made of the audit checklist provided by the NEWB to inform a review of the code of behaviour. A commendable level of consultation informed this review. Members of the school community expressed general satisfaction with the code of behaviour and its implementation. During the evaluation there was a lack of clarity among staff in relation to some aspects of the ladder of referral. At the next review stage, the respective roles of teachers, class tutors, year heads and the senior management team in the operation of the sanctions and rewards at each stage in the ladder of referral should be clarified. Particular attention needs to be given to the delineation of duties between the class tutor and year head. Positive interventions are also made by the care team which includes the school counsellor and the pastoral care worker, who is a member of the Loreto community. Their roles should also be documented to acknowledge the holistic approach taken to managing student behaviour.

The policy on suspension and expulsion is in place but did not form part of the 2009 review of the code of behaviour. While the policy articulates school practices in relation to suspension and expulsion, it does not provide information on how students who are suspended are supported as they re-integrate into the school or how students' educational progress is supported while on suspension. This should be documented to reflect the good practices evident in the school. It is recommended that the board leads a review of this policy in collaboration with staff, parents and students. As part of this review the use of short-term suspension as a sanction for truancy needs to be re-considered. The guidance of the Education Welfare Officer attached to the NEWB may prove useful in this regard.

A very good emphasis is placed on the promotion of positive behaviour. Very good use is made of the range of strategies included on the *Reward/ Encouragement Pyramid* that is circulated to staff. Student achievement is regularly acknowledged on the *Snapshots* section of the school website and on notice boards throughout the school. Student participation and achievement is celebrated through the annual awards ceremonies and at various other celebrations during the year. These practices have proved effective in creating a considerable sense of pride and community spirit among staff and students. Teachers make very good use of the student journal to affirm effort. This very good practice was acknowledged as a key strength of the school by the parents during the evaluation.

High priority is given to encouraging students' attendance and punctuality and a number of measures are in place to track students' attendance and to reward good attendance. Senior management is piloting a number of new strategies in the current academic year which have proven effective. A number of staff members are assigned roles in monitoring and tracking attendance and punctuality. There is scope to refine and delegate some of this work. The administrative duties relating to attendance currently undertaken by the principal should be delegated to year heads and the post-holder with responsibility for attendance. In this context, it is recommended that the board makes arrangements for the development of a ratified attendance strategy in accordance with the Education Welfare Act 2000. The strategy should outline the roles and responsibilities of all staff in the tracking and monitoring of student attendances, identify agreed early response mechanisms and acknowledge the systems currently in place for rewarding students who have good attendance.

The students' council was established in 2008. The council carries out its work in a systematic and proficient manner and makes an effective contribution to many aspects of school life. A review of minutes indicates that the council has provided very valuable and insightful feedback regarding the implementation of relevant school policies. The council is establishing very good links with Comhairle na nÓg and student councils from other

schools. Council members are advised and supported very effectively by a designated liaison teacher who is very committed to ensuring that the council's profile and role continue to grow within the school community. School management needs to further support and acknowledge the leadership role and contribution that the council makes to school life. In this context, consideration should be given to providing a students' council badge to members in recognition of their role in the school.

The active involvement of the parents' association in supporting a wide range of school activities is a fine example of effective partnership within the school. It is particularly noteworthy that the association has an active role in a number of parent information evenings and provides a very good level of support to first-year parents. The association's meetings are very well attended and the presence of a special-duties post holder at each meeting ensures that there is good communication between two key stakeholders within the school community.

During the evaluation, parents spoke warmly of the approachability of staff when issues arose. Parents receive relevant information via text and letters. Reports are sent home following all formal assessments. It is recommended that the range of electronic comments used for student reports be reviewed by staff to ensure that parents are provided with meaningful feedback on the individual student's application and progress in each subject. Currently, the report is signed by the class tutor. In order to give the year heads an overview of students' achievement in their year group, each report should be co-signed by the year head.

The school website, the twice-yearly publication of the school newsletter and the school yearbook are effective means of linking with the community. A very good level of development work is ongoing on the *Snapshots* section of the school website. As part of the upgrade of the website, it is recommended that the main section of the school website be re-configured to remove outdated information. In line with the provision for the parents' association, it is suggested that the board and the students' council should also have a section on the website to display relevant information.

1.4 Management of resources

Good practices are evident in the deployment of staff. Teachers are deployed to mainstream classes in line with their qualifications, experience and expertise. Good efforts are made to build capacity by ensuring that teachers have opportunities to teach each of their specialist subjects and rotate between curriculum programmes and levels. New teachers are well supported through an induction programme, which is led by both the senior management team and the subject co-ordinators. It is intended to incorporate further reflective practices into the induction programme. This worthwhile initiative should complement the work of the teaching and learning staff focus group, which is promoting reflective practice strategies among teachers in the school.

There is a need to review some deployment practices in the school. There is evidence that the supplemental teaching hours provided by the Department and the National Council for Special Education are being used to support students with specified needs. However, at the time of the evaluation, these hours were being delivered by a very large number of staff members. This practice makes collaboration among relevant staff difficult and limits the development of individual teacher expertise through experience and professional development. It is recommended that small core teaching teams of appropriately trained staff be deployed to plan and deliver appropriate programmes of support for students in receipt of learning support and for newcomer students who are in receipt of English as an additional language (EAL) support. A systematic and incremental CPD programme should be implemented to support the work of these teams which will enable them to provide high

quality programmes. The co-ordinators of each team should have a clear list of duties and responsibilities.

Significant deficits were also noted in the availability of appropriate resources to support the learning needs of students in receipt of additional educational support. It is recommended that the SEN and EAL co-ordinators carry out an audit of existing resources and devise action plans to address proactively the shortfalls identified. Designated EAL and learning support rooms should be further developed, to include ICT, to provide a base for learning, establish a bank of shared resources and allow each team to create a stimulating and inclusive learning environment.

For the majority of students, the current weekly instruction time is twenty-eight hours. However, some groups of Leaving Certificate students have less tuition time, as they are timetabled for up to two study periods per week. The Leaving Certificate master timetable should be reviewed to eliminate the study periods. This would ensure compliance with Circular Letter M29/95 and make more efficient use of tuition time. In order to protect the integrity of the school year, ongoing monitoring of the collective impact of the wide range of whole-school activities on students' instruction time is required. Deliberate efforts should be made to exploit synergies and to create direct links between the range of school activities that takes place during the themed weeks and relevant curricular subjects. This should help to optimise learning and to minimise disruption to the students' general instruction time.

The buildings and grounds are well maintained. The very good work of the ancillary staff, teachers and students in keeping the school buildings and grounds in such a very good condition, is commended. Some very good practice was noted where a number of subject areas or extracurricular groups had well designed notice boards or displays on school corridors or classrooms celebrating achievements or work in their related areas.

The board of management takes a proactive role in the management and further development of school buildings. Recent work included the construction of the sports hall and the re-furbishment of the music hall, both of which are wonderful additions to the school facilities. Plans are in place to up-grade the science laboratories and up-grading of the home economics and art rooms will be included in the next strategic plan. Most subject areas are well resourced. Some other aspects of the school building need to be addressed. It is recommended that the board gives considered attention to the public entrance to the school. The design of the unattended reception area is not welcoming for parents or visitors arriving at the school. It does not portray a positive image of the school and does not convey the warm, caring and vibrant learning environment that is evident in the main school building.

The facilities for students to have their lunch and break-time snacks, as well as the practice of students not having access to the canteen at break time should be re-examined. The large study hall could be made available to students as an additional eating space at lunchtime. The absence of a school library is noted as a concern in the appended History inspection report and also by students who met with the inspectors during the evaluation. As part of the next strategic plan, consideration should be given to the phased re-development of the school library.

A proactive and systematic approach is being taken to upgrading the information and communications technology (ICT) and optimising its use as a teaching and learning tool within the school. The roll-out of the ICT project is a very good example of senior management's capacity to match the skills and interests of staff with a specific school need and provide opportunities for staff members to lead initiatives. It is noted as very good

practice that staff training is a core principle underpinning the effectiveness of this project. Internal expertise has been very well utilised in this regard.

A systematic approach is evident in the management of health and safety issues in the school. An annual risk assessment of the building informs the ongoing maintenance plan that is overseen by both a plant manager and a special-duties teacher who has responsibility for health and safety issues. Fire drills are held regularly and records maintained. It would prove beneficial to review the safety signage in some areas of the school to assess if additional notices are required. The advice of the local fire safety officer would prove a useful support in this regard.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School development planning is well established in the school. While to date the principal has had a key leadership role in this area, part of a special-duties post is assigned to supporting the planning process. This post-holder represents the school at relevant cluster meetings of the school development planning support service, co-ordinates aspects of the policy review process and provides the necessary resources to support the work of the various focus groups and subject teams.

The school planning process has had many positive outcomes. The school plan is in place comprising a permanent and developmental section. Staff reported that school development priorities have become more focused. The embedding of ICT as a tool to enhance teaching and learning is an excellent example of where a cohesive and focused approach to planning has impacted very positively on the educational programme offered in the school.

An effective planning process has led to the development and ratification of almost all of the required whole-school policies. The process of policy development has evolved to a stage that it now provides for good levels of meaningful collaboration with parents and students. Systematic review procedures are in place with good use being made of Department resource materials to inform policy reviews. As a means of disseminating information, copies of ratified school policies could be included on the school's website.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's *Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools* (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff; 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. It is recommended that information of the school's child protection procedures be included as part of the induction pack provided to parents of students new to the school.

At staff level, the focus-group structure adopted by the principal to progress planning matters has created a good sense of shared responsibility for school planning. At present, there are twenty focus groups dealing with issues such as student leadership, ICT, curriculum, social justice and school administration. The willingness, generosity and commitment of staff evident from the professional manner in which they have engaged in this work are highly commended. As a next step, a smaller number of areas for further development should be prioritised, in line with the next set of strategic priorities determined and appropriate cohesive action plans should be devised.

The need for staff members to take on a greater ownership in leading and co-ordinating the school development planning process was recognised at some of the meetings held with the inspectors during the evaluation. In this context, it is recommended that the school planning co-ordinator should be a full post in its own right and a steering committee, under the guidance of the post holder, should be established. This committee should oversee the next round of strategic planning and monitor the development and implementation of relevant action plans.

The formal establishment of subject departments has impacted positively on teaching and learning. As evidenced by the planning documentation reviewed during the evaluation, subject department plans are at varying stages of development. There was significant variation in the quality of planning for teaching and learning. The recommendations made in section four of this report should guide the work of all subject teams.

A culture of self-evaluation is evident in the school. The board is monitoring progress of the strategic plan 2006-2011. There is scope for the further involvement of other members of the school community in this process. Subject departments have begun to analyse student attainment. To enhance self-evaluative practice the senior management team has introduced a subject department planning review template. This is a very useful tool and should be used by all teams to assess the effectiveness of department planning.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school provides four curriculum programmes: the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), a Transition Year (TY) programme and the Junior Certificate. There is open access to all of the programmes and the school has the capacity to offer a broad range of subjects within each programme. The provision of subjects such as Typewriting, Design and Communication Graphics (DCG) as well as the recent introduction of Science as a junior cycle core subject exemplify how the school engages in ongoing curriculum review, as espoused in the Loreto vision. This is good practice. Ongoing review needs to be carried out in consultation with all members of the school community with close reference being paid to meeting the needs of all students in the school.

Developing students' ICT skills is identified as a curriculum priority. To support the development of ICT skills, students participate in a fifteen week ICT module in each year of the junior-cycle programme. The module is timetabled by linking it with a subject such as History or Geography. The effectiveness of this practice was praised by staff during the evaluation. However, care should be taken to avoid linking the ICT module with subjects that are only timetabled for one period per week.

Some compliance issues in relation to the provision of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civics, Social and Political Education (CSPE) are noted. While SPHE is timetabled for one class period per week for all junior-cycle students, a number of issues impact on the effectiveness of this provision. To ensure compliance with Circular Letter M11/03 all designated SPHE time must be used for the sole purpose of providing a taught junior cycle SPHE curriculum programme.

In first year, formal classes in SPHE and CSPE do not begin until form tutors complete an induction programme with students. This programme may last up to six weeks. While the merits of an induction programme cannot be under estimated, the current arrangements for

the provision of this programme impacts negatively on the instruction time for CSPE and SPHE. There are obvious links between the contents of the induction programme and the normal content of a first-year SPHE and guidance programmes. Therefore synergies between the induction programme and a first-year SPHE and guidance programmes should be explored.

Appropriate provision is made for senior cycle relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Some commendable provision for SPHE in sixth year was also noted. However, currently junior cycle RSE is provided as stand-alone modules outside of SPHE to students in first, second and third year. This unnecessary practice requires students to be withdrawn from other subjects which impacts on the instruction time available in those subjects. It is recommended that RSE be taught as an integral component of junior cycle SPHE lessons. In line with good practice, a whole-school RSE policy has been ratified by the board of management.

Good provision is made for Physical Education (PE). However the provision of PE for sixth-year students needs review. Currently, PE is timetabled in an option block against LCVP Link Modules, computers, RSE, Lifeskills and SPHE. This practice results in LCVP students who are taking the Link Modules as an eight subject having no access to PE and non-LCVP students only having access to PE on a rotational basis. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed to ensure that all students have access to PE in accordance with the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools*.

In the main, the master timetable facilitates quality learning. There is a good spread and arrangement of lessons to facilitate effective continuity in teaching and learning. Junior cycle students are assigned to mixed-ability classes and concurrent timetabling of subjects such as English, Irish and Mathematics provides students with the flexibility to change level as and when the need arises. Optimum use should be made of the mixed-ability class settings with decisions regarding levels being deferred until as late a stage as possible within the junior cycle. Once levels are decided, the possibility of assigning students to classes within bands of ability rather than to ability streams should be examined thoroughly.

The optional TY programme provides students with opportunities for personal and social development and encourages a positive approach to learning. The TY programme plan is very well developed. The TY modules planned by subject departments are both innovative and creative and very good procedures are in place to support ongoing programme review. The commitment and enthusiasm of the programme co-ordinator and the TY core team in ensuring the success of this programme are commended. Good practice is evident in the arrangements for the organisation of work experience for TY students. Students are well supported as they select work placements and are de-briefed upon completion of the module. The contribution of the guidance team in this process is noteworthy. Given that application to TY is often over-subscribed, the board should keep access to the programme under close review. To enhance inclusive practice, it should be made clear on all correspondence with parents that there is the option of paying the TY contribution in stages rather than a once-off payment prior to students starting the programme.

The school's provision of the LCVP programme needs urgent review. Planning and evaluation of the programme are underdeveloped and several issues require immediate attention. There is an absence of a whole-school approach to planning for LCVP as a programme, which combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise and work. School management needs to embrace fully the rationale and concept of the LCVP programme. It is recommended that an immediate formal review of the programme be undertaken in consultation with parents and students. As part of this review, the question regarding the significant student transfer

rate from the LCVP to the established Leaving Certificate programme, especially among those students who take the Link Modules as an eight subject, should be addressed. The concerns in relation to the trend in student attainment in the Links Modules that were raised by staff during the evaluation need to be analysed and appropriate actions taken. A LCVP core team, led by the LCVP co-ordinator needs to be established to oversee the planning, implementation and systematic review of the programme. Clear criteria for student admission to LCVP should be established and a programme plan that clearly illustrates the whole-school dimension of the programme be devised. The revised scheduling for LCVP students' work experience is indicative of good practice. The procedures for monitoring LCVP students while on work experience should now be agreed and documented as part of the LCVP plan.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Good links have been established with the feeder schools and a range of information is gathered at the point of transfer to the school. The process is led by the principal who is assisted by the deputy principal, members of the guidance team and learning support co-ordinator. In the context of the post review recommended in section 1.3, there is scope for the principal to delegate some of these duties and refine some of the responsibilities among the team. An involvement of the year head for incoming first years could be considered.

The shortcomings regarding the modes of assessment of incoming first years deployed by the school and the decisions-making processes regarding class formation are clearly documented in the appended inspection report on SEN. These shortcomings need to be addressed by school management.

Students have access to all subjects. Option bands for second and fifth year are generated from students' preferences and very good efforts are made to accommodate all student preferences. The recently introduced first-year sampler programme supports students in making informed choices. It is acknowledged by staff that the programme needs to be refined for a number of reasons. Not all optional subjects are included in the programme and as the programme runs for all of first year, there is a significant loss of instructional time in subjects such as Art, Home Economics, Technical Graphics and Music. The fact that Business is a core subject for first year only means that students are studying a subject for a full year that they may not wish to study for their Junior Certificate. Given these issues, the provision of a shorter sampler programme should be explored.

Students and parents are provided with a range of information on programmes and subjects. This is good practice. In the case of one subject noted during the evaluation, it was evident that some of the information provided was misleading and not factually correct. Therefore, it would prove beneficial if all subject departments, in collaboration with the guidance counsellor, would routinely review the subject information sheets designed to inform parents and students.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

There is an excellent range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities on offer to students. Activities on offer encompass the sporting, cultural and artistic facets of school life. Events such as a social justice week and mission week are intrinsically linked with the Loreto ethos and generate a great sense of pride in the Loreto tradition.

Very good efforts are made to acknowledge students' achievements in the extracurricular programme. Photographs and mementoes illustrating various extracurricular activities are displayed on the school corridors. The post-holders with responsibilities for the student achievement awards and public relations effectively lead this work.

It was evident during the evaluation that student involvement in these activities builds leadership capacity and facilitates positive student-teacher relationships. The programme could not operate without the superb commitment and a great spirit of engagement among staff and parents involved in the co-ordination, planning and supervising of these activities. This work is highly valued by the students, parents and the school management as a core school activity.

The good practice of reviewing various extracurricular activities was noted in the school documentation viewed during the evaluation. Some very good initiatives have arisen out of this reflective practice. For instance, the music department is gradually building up a bank of school-owned instruments for the orchestra. These will be offered on loan to students as a means of supporting students who have an interest in Music. As part of staff's ongoing reflections of the various activities, determined efforts should be made to exploit synergies and make direct links with and between relevant curricular subjects to optimise students' learning.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Well-organised subject departments have been established. Departmental meetings, both formal and informal are held on a regular basis throughout the school year. Members of the individual subject departments collaborate well together ensuring that subject plans are informed by the collective expertise of the teaching team. In almost all of the subjects evaluated, a subject co-ordinator is in place. Best practice was evident in instances where the role rotated among the team to build capacity.

Good planning documents were presented across the range of subjects evaluated. The quality of planning for TY in particular was very good with a commendable emphasis being placed on active, interactive and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Planning documentation for subjects is retained in folders, either in electronic or hard-copy format, and used to guide and inform the preparation of lessons. A number of subject plans and programmes of work need to focus more sharply on specific learning outcomes for each topic or area of the subject. Well-defined learning outcomes should be linked to appropriate teaching methodologies, curriculum content, differentiation practices and assessment procedures. Effective forward planning and a well-established culture of collaboration have successfully facilitated and underpinned the use of ICT in teaching and learning in all subjects evaluated.

The quality of collaborative subject planning in the area of special educational needs was poor overall and in need of development. It is recommended that subject departments access publications such as *Signposts: A Resource Pack for Teachers* (2008) and the Department's *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (DES, 2007) and *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007). Each subject team then needs to review and reflect on what planning and preparing for the inclusion of all students actually means in the context of subject planning and implement appropriate strategies. Further CPD input for staff on inclusion would prove useful.

Very good short-term planning was evident for the lessons observed. Teachers had carefully chosen a wide variety of resources to support and enhance teaching and learning.

4.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was good, and often very good, across all subjects inspected. Topics for lessons and learning objectives or intentions were made clear, often in writing, at the outset of the class in almost all cases.

Teachers, and in some instances students also, had created stimulating learning environments in classrooms for their subjects. This was exemplified by the display of charts, diagrams, maps, posters, pictures, student work, and other subject-relevant material. This is very good practice and should be extended to all subjects and rooms.

There was good use of concrete examples, contemporary parallels, and everyday familiar scenarios in the development of lessons, to which students responded positively. In many of the lessons observed, good and often creative use was made of ICT in preparing and presenting material. This should be expanded over time. In some lessons, deliberate efforts were made to actively engage students in the learning process with some very good use of pair and group work noted. This good practice should be pursued further, as there were a few examples of teacher-dominated, text-book-reliant lessons observed. It is recommended, therefore, that active learning strategies should be further developed in all subjects, classes and levels in the school.

Good use was made of question-and-answer techniques. It was clear that teachers knew their students well and varied the level and purpose of questioning. Higher-order thinking was required in many instances and differentiation was also practised in the question-and-answer sessions, so that there was an atmosphere of learning, where all students could progress, at their various paces.

Students show evidence of progressing well in their work and in many instances are achieving high standards. Anticipation of difficult and complex material and concepts was observed in many classes and was a positive aspect of teaching and learning. Reinforcement of material in many subjects was positive and reassured students in their learning. This often took place at the end of lessons, when discussion of learning outcomes was part of the concluding phase of the class. It is recommended that this good practice be extended to all classes and subjects.

4.3 Assessment

A good range of assessment modes is utilised and these are both formative and summative in nature. Some good summative assessment practice was evident, particularly where common tests were set. It is recommended that this practice be extended across all subject areas, where feasible. This will allow a more consistent overview of progress in each year and syllabus.

An examination of students' work indicates that students were generally applying themselves to the assigned work and were reasonably attentive to detail. In some classes visited, it was evident that a system has been developed for students to record and file personal materials from their lessons. This took the form of a folder, or a student workbook or a combination of these. However, this was not the practice in all classes. It is recommended that a system be put in place that enables students to file and store materials from all subject areas. This will allow them to build up a record of their work which can be used for revision purposes.

The wider use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices has been identified as an area for development in the school and it is intended that it be included in the next strategic plan (2012-17). There is currently a working-group discussing a whole-school approach to AfL

in the school. In the subject areas inspected, there was some evidence that teachers use AfL principles in their lessons and in the correction of student work which is good practice. It is recommended that when the outcomes from the AfL working-group are shared among all subject departments that they be incorporated into subject planning practice.

An analysis of the school's performance in the certificate examinations is carried out by the principal and this includes comparisons with national norms. In some subject areas, this information is used to inform subject department planning and this is commendable practice. It is recommended that a detailed analysis of results in certificate examinations be carried out by all subject departments and utilised to inform subject planning and review.

Teachers keep good records of students' attendance, completion of homework and achievement in assessments. These are discussed at formal parent-teacher meetings which are held annually for each year group. The student journal is utilised as a valuable means of communicating with parents, where teachers can send home positive and encouraging notes and advisory messages, when necessary. Test results are also noted in the students' journal. Parents and class tutors sign the journal each week. These are very good practices.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

A small number of students attending Loreto Secondary School, St. Michael's, have additional educational needs. All staff members involved in the provision of additional educational support demonstrate a high level of commitment to and concern for the students in their care. However, there is an urgent need to review the organisation and operation of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision, the English as an additional language (EAL) provision, and to document the support programme provided for students from the Traveller community. Particular attention needs to focus on ensuring that the programmes in each case are sufficiently structured and robust to support the specific needs of the students, both from an academic, social and personal perspective, underpinned by inclusive practice, so as to allow for their fullest participation of these students in the life of the school.

Deliberate efforts are being made to build up staff expertise in supporting students who have a special educational need. The SEN co-ordinator and one other teacher hold post-graduate qualifications in this area. A number of other teachers have completed on-line courses. In light of the findings of the appended SEN report, it is recommended that the school reviews the arrangements for SEN co-ordination. Additional advice on the further development of the SEN department is provided in the subject inspection report attached to this report.

There is also scope for further development in the system for monitoring the progress of students who are in receipt of resource teaching and learning support. It is recommended that the school develop an assessment policy to ensure that the progress of students with special educational needs is systematically monitored, recorded and reported.

The school receives a teacher allocation of .48 whole-time equivalent (WTE) to provide English language support to newcomer students. Most of these hours are deployed to provide additional subject-specific or literacy support to newcomer students, with the remaining hours given to providing pastoral supports. A common practice identified in the school is the inclusion of newcomer students who are exempt from the study of Irish in support classes organised for students with learning difficulties. This is not an acceptable use of resource or learning-support hours when these students do not have learning

difficulties. One-to-one withdrawal of EAL students as a mode of delivery should also be discontinued. It is recommended that students in receipt of EAL be assigned to small groups based on their language ability as well as their social and cultural needs.

The EAL co-ordinator should engage with the feeder schools to devise a more targeted approach to assist students and their parents as they transfer from the primary schools. The initial assessments carried out using one of the specifically designed assessment tools available. The assessment outcomes should then be used to establish key deliverable learning targets for each student that can be readily tracked and monitored. Systematic reviews of students' individual language programme should take place to ensure that the provision of support remains flexible to meet ever-changing needs. A systematic filing system should be in place to facilitate ease of access when tracking progress and amending programmes. Further training in this area should be accessed from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (www.pdst.ie).

Good links have been established with external agencies. The school acknowledges the supports provided to it by the Special Educational Needs Organiser, National Educational Psychological Services psychologist and the Visiting Teacher Services who support students from the Traveller community and students with hearing or visual impairments. The personnel involved currently liaise mainly with the principal. It is recommended that they have direct access to relevant teaching staff and special needs assistant as well as to the students concerned. This will help to ensure that a holistic and informed approach is taken to supporting students' needs.

The school receives an allocation of .41 WTE to support students who are members of the Traveller community. While these hours are allocated appropriately a more structured and robust programme of support should be devised and documented to clearly outline the type of academic, social and personal supports that the school provides.

The school needs to address how planning for inclusion could take a more centralised position in the whole-school planning process. As part of this process, it is recommended that the school develops a whole-school policy for inclusion.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

There is a very good sense of care in the school, as evidenced by the number of guidance and pastoral care student support systems in operation in the school. The school's ex-quota guidance allocation of 1.36 WTE is deployed among a team of three people. There is a very good level of collaboration among team members. An excellent range of facilities and resources is in place to support the work of the guidance team and a strong commitment to CPD is evident.

The guidance counsellors provide a very good range of educational, personal and vocational guidance supports for students. A review of the guidance documentation indicates that good follow-through is evident in relation to a number of the recommendations made in a previous subject inspection report on Guidance. A detailed subject plan for guidance has been developed. A pastoral care worker of huge assistance in many areas of activity within the school and has a noteworthy role in supporting the student peer mediators and school prefects. Parents expressed their appreciation for the contribution made by the pastoral care worker in providing a range of supports to parents and students.

A review of the master timetable highlighted some inequality of access to timetabled lessons in Guidance in the case of three groups of fifth-year students. In the current academic year a new fifth-year guidance programme, which is timetabled, is being piloted

with two class groups. The remaining fifth-year groups are provided with Guidance by arranging access through other subjects. In the context of future timetabling, it is recommended that all fifth-year classes should have equality of access to timetabled provision for Guidance without any erosion of tuition time in other subjects. To support the planned guidance interventions in junior cycle, more formal links could be established between SPHE and Guidance to facilitate the very good programme of work outlined in the guidance plan.

Personal Guidance and support is provided by all members of the guidance team. Procedures are in place to support student referrals; however, it is recommended that procedures be put in place to ensure that all student referrals for one-to-one counselling should, in the first instance, be directed to the qualified school counsellor. The work can then be delegated to members of the guidance team in accordance with their qualifications and expertise. In this context, the balance of personnel counselling assigned to the qualified counsellor and the pastoral care worker should be reviewed. This may necessitate a review of how the vocational dimension of the guidance programme is delivered by the guidance team.

A care team comprising key personnel meets once a term. The team, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, has developed a whole-school critical incident response policy in line with Department guidelines. This is indicative of very good practice. It is acknowledged by school management that there is scope to augment the role of the care team beyond its main remit of managing critical incidents. Initial steps in this area have already been undertaken.

The school's care system would benefit from the development of an over-arching whole-school guidance policy. This policy is necessary to co-ordinate the very good work already being done and to ensure that an integrated approach is being adopted. The policy should be drafted by a sub-committee of all relevant personnel, after an analysis of school's needs has been completed. This process will also provide an opportunity to investigate an expanded role of the care team as well as clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all staff in the care of students.

A committed team of year heads and tutors supports students' care. It was noted positively, that where feasible, year heads and tutors remain with students throughout the junior and senior cycle programme. It would be desirable to organise dedicated time for tutors and year heads to meet with their students to minimise disruption to direct instructional time. This would give an opportunity for year heads and tutors to carry out a variety of administrative or pastoral tasks and so avoid erosion of tuition time in other subject areas.

The spiritual development of students is supported by the calendar of liturgical services, retreats and RE lessons. The prayer room is a great asset to the school and acts as a focal point for the school community.

Policies in the areas of anti-bullying and substance use support student well-being in the school. It was noted that the school also runs a whole-school anti-bullying awareness week. To optimise the potential of the taught SPHE programme, it is recommended that a coherent and balanced programme of work for SPHE be developed.

Student leadership skills are fostered and the care of students is further enhanced through the work of the school prefects and peer mediators. Both groups carry out their role in a well organised and informed manner. The student peer mediation group plays a particularly valuable role in promoting positive student relationships within the school. The school prefects make a significant contribution to many aspects of school life. They maintain a visible presence in the school in actively supporting students and are an integral part of all school activities. There is further scope to augment the role of the school prefect. The

apparent overlaps between the duties of prefects and the work of the class captains, students' council members and peer mediators should be considered in this context.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is committed to providing a holistic education within a positive and vibrant learning environment. The trustees actively support the school in upholding the Loreto ethos.
- The board of management is very committed and takes an informed approach to carrying out its duties. Good reflective practice is evident.
- Staff members have a good skills base and are highly committed to their work. They consistently set high aspirations for students in their care.
- The parents' association and students' council are dynamic and effective partners in the school community.
- The principal and deputy principal operate as an effective and competent team.
- Successful school development planning has led to the effective implementation of a number of development priorities and to the collaborative development of almost all of the required whole-school policies.
- There is open access to all of the curriculum programmes available in the school which has the capacity to offer a broad range of subjects within each programme.
- A very successful TY programme provides students with opportunities for personal and social development and encourages a positive and innovative approach to learning.
- There is an excellent range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was very good with some effective use of ICT evident.
- There is a very good sense of care in the school.

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

- The board should make arrangements for the collaborative development of the next set of strategic priorities for the period 2012-2017. A steering committee, under the guidance of the school planning co-ordinator, should be established to monitor the development and implementation of the subsequent action plans devised.
- The model of in-school management should be re-configured to enable the school to meet the changing demands of the community it serves. Senior management should delegate responsibility further so as to create a clearly identifiable middle management team whose members have genuine responsibility for the varying duties assigned.
- Planning for more meaningful inclusion should take a centralised position in school planning. The board should make arrangements for the development of a whole-school policy on inclusion and the organisation and operation of programmes that support students with additional educational needs should be reviewed.
- To enhance curriculum provision a formal review of the LCVP programme should be undertaken and the compliance issues noted in relation to SPHE, CSPE and PE should be resolved.

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 CSPE – 22 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of History – 21 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 21 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Science and Biology – 20 October 2010
- Subject Inspection of Special Education Needs – 22 October 2010

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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 WSE's positive and encouraging report. In particular the Board of Management is very pleased that the report strongly recognises and confirms the many strengths of the school.

The Board of Management would like to express its appreciation to the WSE Inspectors for their hard work and detailed response.

The Board of Management would also like to thank the whole school community for their dedication, hard work and commitment to Loreto Secondary School, St. Michael's, which was recognised by the WSE report.

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

The Board of Management acknowledges the suggestions and supportive comments expressed in the WSE report, many of which form part of existing school planning and practice, and which have been further addressed since the WSE report.

The Board of Management is committed to continuing in its support of the school community in its planning and many significant initiatives which have always been part of best practice at St. Michael's. In this capacity the Board of Management very much appreciates and welcomes the WSE report in addressing areas to build on for the future development of the school.

The report will assist in school planning and development as far as resources will allow.