

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Rice College,
Westport, County Mayo
Roll number: 647000

Date of inspection: 27 November 2009



WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Rice College 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 separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details).

The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Rice College CBS secondary school has been in Westport since 1865 and moved to the present site in 1987. The school is adjacent to the Sisters of Mercy Sacred Heart School. The school draws students from an extensive catchment that is, with the exception of Westport itself, entirely rural. Westport is a prosperous and attractive town with a thriving tourist industry. Since September 2009 Rice College is the only boys' second-level school in Westport as the local vocational school is in the process of phasing out its second-level enrolment.

The enrolment figures for the school have increased in the past three years and further increases are expected. This may have implications for the school's curriculum as the vocational school was the only provider of second-level engineering and technology education in the town. The school already co-operates with Sacred Heart School in regard to Transition Year and further co-operation may be considered especially in the light of the current economic environment that is challenging the school's ability to maintain its broad curriculum.

The school is at an early stage of its membership of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST), which is the new patronage body for former Christian Brothers' schools. In the past year considerable progress has been made in the development of whole-school policies to guide the school. The school has a high standing in the local community and the community is represented on the board of management. As part of this commitment to its community, the school has an admission policy that commits it to accepting all students. A significant number of students with special educational needs are included in its enrolment.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The charter of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust identifies five key elements that schools in the trust are called upon to sustain and develop. The first of these principles recognises the Catholic values underpinning the education being provided by the school. Other key values espoused by ERST schools include partnership in the school community, excellence in teaching and learning, the creation of a caring community, and inspiring transformational leadership. These are referred to in the school's admission policy and some of its other policies including its religious education policy. The school should consider further how these principles might be included in its other policies.

The school's mission statement is broadly in line with the Edmund Rice Schools Trust charter and it has at its centre the development of the full potential of each student. The school prides itself on its strong academic record and on the manner in which it caters for the needs of students with special educational needs and in need of learning support as well

as exceptionally able students. The school is embarking on a new beginning in respect of its patronage body, and the key principles that underpin that patronage. It is therefore an opportune time to reflect on the school's vision and mission statement and on how it can be made a reality in its daily life. The Edmund Rice Schools Trust provides support for school principals and for schools, including Rice College, in regard to the training of board members, and in relation to student councils. In developing the vision and mission statement of the school the board and school management should avail of the advice and support that is offered by the school's trustees.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management of the school is properly constituted and carries out its functions and its statutory obligations in a committed and diligent manner. It takes its role and statutory duties seriously and fulfils that role effectively. The board takes an active role in the management of the school and members of the board display a very good knowledge of the school. The board is diligent in documenting its meetings. In order to increase further its effectiveness it should consider having less detailed minutes that would include the topics addressed at meetings and that would indicate the issues raised and decisions taken.

The board of management should lead the school in addressing the further development of leadership at all levels in line with the ERST principles. In this regard the board is keenly aware of the key role to be played by the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers in the further development of the school and to this end it has given much support in this area.

The board carries out its role in the policy area through reviewing existing policies as they are brought before it and through the amendment and ratification of new policies submitted to it. The board sees the development of structures for student care as a challenge and a priority, particularly given recent traumatic events that affected the school. The appointment in March of a chaplain for the school is seen as a major positive step in this regard. The board has recently considered a number of policies in the student care area and these are currently being worked on in the school. The school's draft care policy, when completed, should be the principal policy in respect of student care and should incorporate within it other draft policies impacting on student care such as the school's anti-bullying policy and, when completed, the school's critical incident management plan. The board has clear development policies: catering for the increasing enrolment in terms of the school's buildings and its curriculum; and improving support for students with special educational needs. Other priorities for development include the improvement of the school's finances, and planning and policy development to achieve the school's aims. While doing this the board is keenly aware of the importance of maintaining teachers' morale and student discipline. The board of management should ensure that all school policies are referred to the parents' council and the student council at an early stage so as to allow for effective involvement of these bodies in the school planning process.

The board considers that it has made progress in relation to developing further the school's structures for the support of students with special educational needs through supporting the training of two additional teachers in this area so that the school will shortly have three teachers with special education qualifications.

At present applications for admission of students to the school and occasional appeals of decisions on these are considered by the board. This has been quite a time-consuming process. The board should review its role in relation to the admission of students perhaps through delegating this area to the principal, thus allowing for an appellate process.

The board considers that standards of teaching and learning in the school are high and it bases this judgement on comparisons between the overall state examination results from year to year, on subject inspection reports and on the achievement by some students of very high grades in the state examinations. To supplement this evidence base, the board should also have access to an analysis of the school's examination results each year in comparison with national norms, including the proportion of the school's students taking subjects at higher level. The board should also as a policy oversee the implementation of the recommendations of subject inspection reports.

The parents' council is highly supportive of the school and considers that the school's main focus should be on teaching and learning. Members at their meeting expressed the view that the school's sporting provision should be diversified somewhat. The parents' council is a well-developed body that has made a major contribution to the school in terms of the provision of resources. It enjoys a close relationship with school management. A measure of the status of the parents' council in the school community is the attendance of the principal and a member of the school's middle management at each of its meetings. The parents' council shows commitment to the development of the school and the education it provides through its current focus on the development and extension of its role towards having a greater input into school policies and school life in general. As part of this the council sees itself as developing its role in the school community in partnership with the school. Such a partnership role is very much in keeping with the values of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust trusteeship.

1.3 In-school management

The school has a leadership team that is committed to the further development of the school including the raising of standards in all areas. The senior school management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, is new in this role with the principal having been appointed in 2008 and the deputy to the permanent position in 2009, having previously served in an acting capacity. They are committed and diligent in carrying out their duties. They have fairly well defined roles and they co-operate in key areas. The principal and deputy principal collaborate well and have a high level of communication as shown by their twice-daily formal meetings. Consensus is their preferred method of achieving progress.

The principal is working on developing a clear understanding of the school and from that her vision for the school. She was impressive in her ready grasp of the issues raised during the evaluation. The principal's vision for the school, which is articulated in terms of academic standards and care of students, also encompasses other areas. The vision is congruent with the ERST principles. The principal shares her vision of the school with the school community through student assemblies, visits to classrooms, information sessions with parents and in leading staff meetings. In her short time in the school, the principal has overseen the development and review of several school policies. The evaluation team is confident that, as she develops further in the role, clear leadership will be shown by the principal through increased delegation to middle management, in particular in addressing the issues raised in the evaluation.

The deputy principal has been in the role for two years. He has responsibility for several areas, most notably the school timetable and much that goes with it. He has shown huge commitment and readiness to work very hard in his role and has made a major contribution to the school in many ways. Notable among these is his moving forward the development of information and communication technology (ICT) in the school.

As part of its leadership role senior management should lead the increased incorporation of the principles of ERST in the day-to-day life of the school, in school documentation and in

school policies and procedures. The weekly meeting of senior management with the assistant principals is very good practice in sharing leadership and fostering communication. This forum provides much support for senior management in leading the school and in turn the assistant principals gain an understanding of whole-school issues.

Most assistant principals are year heads and one has a responsibility for the development of the school plan and school policies. Another has a set of duties that are in the area of special needs and learning support. The duties of year heads relate principally to discipline. Posts are also held at special duties teacher level. The descriptors of the duties of post-holders as provided in the school's documentation are brief. From a review of these duties it is clear that the distribution of leadership among staff members needs to be further addressed through members of middle management undertaking roles that carry a greater level of responsibility and leadership. While some of the posts support the achievement by the school of its objectives, in the case of others this is less obvious. The range of duties included in the post structure should be based on an inclusive review, carried out as part of the whole-school planning process, to determine the priority needs of the school. The duties assigned to all post-holders should be specified in sufficient detail so that the performance of the duties can be evaluated on an annual basis by each post holder with the principal. This documentation should also form the basis of an annual review of the duties of posts so as to ensure that the priority needs of the school are being addressed. The duties assigned to special duties teachers should be balanced in terms of the scope of these duties. The duties assigned to each post-holder, including the principal and deputy principal, should be displayed in the staffroom.

The principal purpose of staff meetings is to convey clear information to the staff by management. The practice of preparing detailed minutes of staff meetings should be reviewed. Minutes of staff meetings should record the proceedings giving the issues discussed, the main points raised and decisions, if any, taken. In order to secure a more participative decision-making process other fora should be established that would act as advisory or decision-making bodies in the school. The school's planning process could have a role here.

The school's code of behaviour is stated in positive terms and is considered strict but fair by students and parents. It is based on respect and rooted in the philosophy of the school. The policy is under review in the light of the NEWB guidelines on developing codes of behaviour. This review is expected to be completed shortly. The review should take account of the number of student suspensions that take place each year. The school should also examine the causes giving rise to the suspensions so as to see whether there are underlying issues that need to be addressed. In reviewing the code of behaviour, the procedures for dealing with disciplinary issues should be clarified and should be linked with the school's care structure.

The school's student council is a committed body of students who expressed clear ideas and are fully committed to their important role. They have a number of significant achievements to their credit including the initiation of a laptop scheme for students and the provision of healthier lunches for students. The regular meetings between representatives of the student council and the parents' council are evidence of the desire of both bodies to have clear communication. First-year students should be represented on the student council and elections should be held each year. To aid the further development of the student council the members should receive training each year and the student council notice board should be placed in a more prominent location.

The school enjoys good communication with its parent body. Parents commented favourably on the organisation and usefulness of parent-teacher meetings. The school shows its commitment in this area through inviting parents who have missed a parent-

teacher meeting, to attend at the next one. The school has effective links with outside agencies and with the general community. The school's large sports hall is community funded and much used by the community. In turn the sports hall is a considerable benefit to the school.

Self-review and self-evaluation by the school's management takes place largely on an informal basis. The school management and staff should adopt a critical approach to evaluating each aspect of its operation.

1.4 Management of resources

The most important resource for the school is its teaching staff. Other key resources are its ancillary staff and the school's building and other facilities. The school's facilities are all very well maintained and presented and reflect care on the part of management and staff, including the members of the ancillary staff of the school. A concern raised in the course of the evaluation by inspectors was in relation to the need to improve the learning environment in some classrooms.

The school's building, which was designed for an enrolment of about 350 students compared with the school's current enrolment of 503, has been extended in a small way on a number of occasions and the school has use of some additional classrooms in the sports hall. Even so the building is quite cramped and is likely to become more so if current enrolment trends continue. School management has some health and safety concerns in this regard and for this reason safety should be kept under continual review.

Increasing the accommodation available to the school is a management priority and the school is taking a considered and well-planned approach to addressing its future accommodation needs. The school is also engaged in a programme of planned refurbishment. As well as taking into account the projected enrolment increase, the school is also taking into consideration the expected curricular impact of the closure of the second-level part of Carrowbeg College. School management is taking a three-pronged approach to addressing its accommodation needs, through use of the Summer Works Scheme, through use of the temporary accommodation grant form, and through its long-term strategic plan. This is very good practice.

Deployment of school staff is in line with qualifications and almost all members of teaching staff are fully qualified for the subjects that they teach. In the case of Physical Education (PE), several of the teachers of this subject do not have a qualification in that area. This has been referred to in a subject inspection report on PE carried out in 2002. This should be addressed.

In line with good practice the school continually reviews its staffing needs. In deploying teachers the school is aware of the need to ensure that they teach their subject to the highest level. As well as developing the skills of teachers this also ensures that there is a second teacher available to teach most subjects.

The board of management is highly supportive of teachers' CPD. As part of this the school has undertaken whole-school CPD on an annual basis. The school also keeps a log of the CPD undertaken by staff members. This support should be complemented by the development by school management and staff of a whole-school CPD strategy that would be linked to school planning and that would have as its objective the development of the necessary skills in the school community to achieve the objectives of the school, as spelled out in the Edmund Rice Schools Trust charter and the school's mission statement.

Resources are supplied to subject departments on request by teachers with the exception of the Material Technology (Wood) department which has an annual budget. The school's ICT development is supported by its ICT strategic plan. While the school has well-developed ICT facilities, and further provision is a school priority, there is a need to develop further the use of ICT in teaching and learning and in subject planning.

The school has an up-to-date safety statement. The duties of the post-holder designated as school safety officer in that statement should be clarified to reflect the fact that they carry out that role under the direction of the principal who is the school's safety officer. A staff safety representative should be appointed as provided for in health and safety legislation. In addition, regular hazard assessments by staff of the areas for which they are responsible should be incorporated in the school's safety statement.

The school community shows a very good sense of responsibility for the environment. One example of this is that it is now working towards its fourth Green Flag, having participated in the scheme over several years.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

Considerable progress has been made in the school planning area since the appointment of the present senior management team. This builds on the work done by the previous senior school management. A number of important school policies have been drawn up and have been approved by the board of management. A school planning co-ordinator has been appointed.

It is necessary that, through further sharing of her vision for the school, the principal should lead a planning process that embraces the school community and that is targeted on achieving the aims of the school including its development priorities. As well as leadership from senior management, there is scope for greater leadership within the school, especially among middle management, in the development of the school's policies and plans. The leadership role of senior school management with regard to the planning process should be one of enabling and facilitating a collaborative process.

There is a need for a clearer recognition within the school community of the need for a fully inclusive planning process that addresses in particular achieving the aims of the school in the following areas: teaching and learning, including special needs and learning support; and student care. In initiating this process school management, including the board of management, should provide the recently appointed school planning coordinator with a role description that includes defined responsibilities and measurable targets. Structures should be set up that would facilitate a whole-school planning process. Workgroups from school staff should be set up, that would involve all members of staff, to carry out the initial work on the development of policies and the planning and implementation of action plans. The planning coordinator should act as convener, advisor and resource provider for each of these groups. The whole-school approach should also include seeking and making use of contributions from all of the partners. In order to ensure the continuing centrality of student learning in the school there should be a link between whole-school planning for teaching and learning and planning at a subject department level.

The development of the school's policies should be concluded as rapidly as possible so that the school community can have a comprehensive set of policies reflective of its ethos and values. Among the policies that fall into this category are: Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE), Special Educational Needs (SEN), school attendance strategy, care

policy, and guidance plan. Each policy should have indicated on it the date of formal adoption by the board and a proposed review date.

The school has a well-developed plan, the first part of which is on the school's established features, that that is very well presented. This part of the plan gives an overview of the school including its ethos, history, structures, including the parents' council, the student council, the school's code of behaviour and its anti-bullying policy. The section also outlines the school's support systems and its pastoral care structure. Succinct descriptions of the key roles and functions within the school are also included. It is a valuable resource for management and planning.

The second part of the school plan concerns itself with the development priorities of the school and how they might be achieved. Among these are addressing the overcrowding that exists in the school, fundraising, addressing the implications of being the sole provider of second-level education for boys in the area, improving the documentation of subject department planning, further developing special needs provision, and further policy development. Some draft action plans are included and preliminary work is evident in the school plan on the development of a five-year plan for the school. It is clear that a considerable amount of work has been put into developing the school plan to this stage. To help in gaining wide ownership of the plan and therefore a greater chance of the developmental priorities within it being implemented, the plan should be in evidence at school occasions and referred to in school communications, for example, the newsletter.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science, September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (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 effectiveness of the implementation and consequent impact of existing school policies should be continually evaluated and reviewed as necessary. Responsibility for this should lie with the proposed planning workgroups.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school has a broad curriculum with a system of choices that is student-centred. It includes a wide range of curricular programmes including Junior Certificate (JC), Transition Year (TY), established Leaving Certificate (LC), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The breadth and range of choices in the school's curriculum show clearly a determination on the part of the school to make a reality of its characteristic spirit.

Provision for review of the school's curriculum is informal. There should be a system for formal consultation on the curriculum involving teachers, parents and the board of management. While it is acknowledged that the school's PE programme contains a broad range of activities, some of the issues raised in a previous subject inspection report on PE appear not to have been addressed. A more detailed curricular plan should be developed for

PE and the recommendations of the 2002 PE report should be implemented as soon as possible.

The junior cycle core curriculum includes Science and either Materials Technology (Wood) (MTW) or Technical Graphics (TG). French, Business and Art are optional subjects. There is a lack of clarity in the timetable regarding the time allocation for MTW, TG, and Science in the junior cycle curriculum. They appear to have time allocations that are greater than any other subject except Mathematics. A review should be carried out of the junior cycle curriculum that would look at the time allocation for subjects, especially Irish, English, and Mathematics; the subjects to be included in the junior cycle core curriculum; and the curriculum for the information technology (IT) programme in second and third years. Before that review is carried out a document outlining the junior cycle curriculum should be prepared for the staff, board of management, and parents' council. The document should include the subjects, both core and choice subjects, the time allocation for subjects, and the outline curricula for non-examination subjects. It is suggested that a small group, representative of languages, mathematics and business, should meet with the deputy principal in the preparation of the school's timetable.

The school's senior cycle programmes are evaluated by the school on an annual basis through formal consultation with parents, students and teachers. TY is a highlight of the school's curriculum and is very popular among students with the majority of students choosing it each year. Very good records are kept in relation to TY activities. A sizeable number of students are involved in LCVP. All LCVP students should have access to a modern European language as has been recommended in previous subject inspection reports. The school documentation for LCA is of a high standard and is an indicator of a highly effective programme.

TY students are involved in a wide range of activities and in particular the links with the Sacred Heart Secondary School are strengths of the programme. Through these links students of the school have access to a broad curriculum and also share in an environmental science module that is jointly run by the two schools. It is evident that a considerable amount of work is put into the organisation of TY with three teachers involved in its coordination. The school's criteria for adjudicating on the entry of students to TY are quite demanding of students; in the meeting with the parents' council concern was expressed at students being excluded from TY based on their behaviour record. It is suggested that the selection of students for TY should also take into account the needs of individual students that could be met by participation in TY. In reviewing the curriculum for TY, the need for more detail in the plans for some subjects should be addressed.

The school places a big emphasis on education in ICT in its curriculum and the impact of this is felt in junior cycle and in TY, which includes nine lessons each week on ICT. While the school's reasons for this are in the best interests of its students, this is too great an emphasis and should be reviewed. ICT should be included in all subjects rather than as a discrete subject. The school should examine the position of ICT on its curriculum overall and in particular in TY in relation to the aims of its TY programme.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

The school provides students with a good choice of subjects at senior level while at junior level there is some scope for improvement. Students choose between Technical Graphics and Materials Technology (Wood) after a short taster programme in the first term. They make a further choice of two subjects from Art, French and Business at the end of first year. While it is good practice that students receive a taster in subjects before making choices, a more open choice process would be better. The guidance report associated with

this report refers to the booklet that has been prepared by the guidance counsellor to assist students in their subject choices for senior cycle. Subject teachers contributed information about their respective subjects for inclusion in the booklet. A presentation on programme options for senior cycle is made and an information night for parents is held to inform them about the programme options. This is very good practice.

The school involves parents in the subject-choice process by having information evenings to provide them with guidance on the subject and programme choices that their sons are making. As part of this, parents are also advised on third-level and other options available to their sons when they leave school. This degree of involvement of parents in their sons' decision making is good practice.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

Many teachers are involved in programmes of activities in support of students' learning. The school's three-times-yearly newsletter gives a clear picture of a school that places a high value on co-curricular and extracurricular activities in the education of its students.

Among the activities provided by the school are debating, public speaking, and an annual musical in conjunction with Sacred Heart School. The school has participated in and won the all-Ireland science quiz, and students also participate in many fundraising events. The school also has a liturgical musical group that sings and plays at the parish mass. Members of school staff are involved in guiding all of these activities. In doing this they show a commitment to the education of their students in the widest sense.

Sports in the school include Gaelic football, badminton, soccer, swimming, golf, rugby, boxing, athletics, and handball. Once again the dedication of many members of staff is evident in the benefit that students take from the sporting activities that take place in the school. This is crowned by the many successes that have been achieved by the school on the sporting field.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

The school has recently engaged in whole-school continuing professional development in differentiation, as part of the school's policy with regard to mixed-ability teaching. The school should increase the value that is gained from this through linking professional development to whole-school planning, and to subject department planning.

The process of subject department planning is facilitated by formal planning meetings and the appointment of co-ordinators. Subject department plans examined as part of the WSE process showed that there is a variation in the extent to which subject departments have engaged with the subject-planning process. In some subject areas curricular plans consisted solely of lists of topics to be completed within broad timeframes. In other subject areas, more detailed and comprehensive curricular plans had been developed to support teaching and learning. The subject departments should adhere to good planning practices in all subject areas. In particular a curricular plan is needed for CSPE for each year group. Recommendations on planning and other areas made in previous subject inspections reports have not been fully addressed. Each subject department should have a planning folder that includes records of meetings, curricular planning for each year group including TY, and subject inspection reports with specific emphasis on the implementation of recommendations. Subject plans should include the content to be covered within specified timeframes along with associated learning outcomes to be achieved, resources to be used

and the modes of assessment in place. The methodologies, including differentiation strategies employed to attain learning outcomes and planning for the integration of ICT in the classroom, should also be included in these plans. The strategic approach to subject planning, seen in one subject department where areas for development had been identified and targeted within the planning process, is highly commended and should be a model for all departments.

Written documentation in relation to the TY programme was reviewed. Arising from this review it is evident that the guidelines set out in the document *Writing the Transition Year Programme* and *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools* available on <http://ty.slss.ie> need to inform planning to a greater extent.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Both members of the school's senior management team are committed to the achievement by the school of the highest standards in teaching and learning. Key elements of assuring quality are seen by them as being the selection of teaching staff, teachers' CPD, and maintenance of student discipline. School management and staff need to reflect further on and plan for the leadership that is required for the school to achieve high standards of teaching and learning. As part of this, standards of teaching and learning should be reviewed systematically in respect of all students, including students with special educational needs.

Good quality teaching and learning were observed over the course of the evaluation. There was effective short-term planning for the lessons evaluated. Teachers had prepared a variety of resource materials including PowerPoint presentations, maps, worksheets and audio clips to support student learning. The learning objectives were clearly communicated to students at the outset of lessons. This good practice provides a structure for lessons and a clear framework for learning for students.

A variety of teaching methodologies was deployed to stimulate interest and engagement in the learning process. Whole-class teaching, brainstorming, discussion and questioning featured in many lessons and in some cases these were combined with activity-based learning tasks including completion of worksheets and group work. Student learning was most evident where there was evident active engagement by students with the lesson content. In some lessons the integration of ICT facilitated a visual approach to teaching and learning and positively impacted on students' interest in the lesson. Given the school's extensive ICT infrastructure, the use of ICT in lessons should be further developed.

In most lessons a directed questioning strategy was used very well to challenge students, assess their knowledge and promote the development of higher-order thinking skills. It is recommended that this be incorporated into all lessons. Good use was made of the whiteboard to present teaching points and to record students' contributions. In a small number of cases note-taking was a significant part of students' learning. Note-taking should be restricted to key points to save class time. An interesting and meaningful learning context was created in some lessons through use of examples drawn from contemporary life, anecdotes of interest, and the local environment.

In all lessons there was a positive atmosphere characterised by good rapport between teachers and students. Teachers were affirming of students efforts and encouraged their participation in lessons. On the whole students demonstrated a good level of understanding and engagement with the topics under study and were learning.

4.3 Assessment

Formal school examinations are held at Christmas and summer for non-examination classes while third and sixth-year sit mock examinations in the second term. Whilst some teachers set tests for examination classes at Christmas all examination classes should have some form of formal assessment prior to their mock examinations. Common examinations should be held across year groups in all subjects so as to ensure consistency in syllabus delivery. Parents are informed about students' progress through school reports and an annual parent-teacher meeting organised for each year group.

School management analyses the results of state examinations and circulates them to subject departments. Each subject department should also examine and compare students' examination performance with national norms. This will bring an element of self-evaluation to the work of the subject departments and will enable trends to be identified so as to inform future subject planning.

Formative assessment in classes is carried out through questioning, completion of class tasks, and in TY through monitoring of project work. Students' copies indicated the use of formative feedback in some classes. The use of formative assessment in the correction of students work would be a help to students in improving their work. Homework is regularly assigned in most class groups. Within the framework of the whole-school policy for homework subject departments should agree the frequency of homework and the types of homework to be assigned.

Student achievement levels in general are in line with national norms, with the proportion taking subjects at higher level in the state examinations exceeding national norms in several subjects including English. In other subject areas, for example Irish, there is a need to increase the number of students taking the subject at higher level.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school's attitude to students with special educational needs and to students in need of learning support is expressed clearly in its admission policy which states that students with special educational needs are welcome to Rice College. The school has a substantial number of students that receive additional support. All of the school's actions in respect of these students from board of management level to the work of individual teachers providing support are in the context of the school's mission statement and its commitment to meeting the needs of students.

There are good links with primary schools. All in-coming first year students are assessed using school-designed tests in addition to the Drumcondra Reasoning Test. The results of these assessments, along with information from feeder primary schools, are used to identify students who require additional support. The school plan states that the school puts a dedicated programme in place for students that might need it. Small resource classes are included for English and Mathematics as well as individual support through withdrawal from other subject areas, for example where students do not take Irish or French. The school also has a dedicated support unit for students who require more intensive support. While the curriculum for the students in the support unit is as yet not fully decided, the school is considering making use of FETAC modules. The school should prioritise the development and the documentation of a curriculum for the unit.

The school is in receipt of additional teaching resources. The school keeps a clear record of the allocation of additional support to students. In some instances these resources have been applied to the school's general curriculum. The school should review the way in which it allocates these resources so that their delivery is more clearly related to the purposes for which they have been given. In particular it should be clear that each student who has been allocated additional support is receiving that support. It is acknowledged that the school is addressing this matter as a priority.

While the special needs and learning-support area constitutes a substantial part of the school's provision, up to now it has functioned without a policy. In view of the priority it attaches to developing the school's provision for students with additional educational needs, the board of management should lead the drawing up of a policy that would describe the school's practices and give guidance to the staff involved in this area. The policy should be drawn up by the school's student-support team. The policy should describe how the school identifies the learning needs of students, how it meets these needs, and how students' progress is monitored. The policy should also include a description of the role of staff members and other professionals. The policy should have an emphasis on teaching and learning. Provision should be made within the policy for ongoing informal review of the school's learning-support and special-education provision and a formal evaluation and review every few years. The school should make use of the resources of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and the Department's publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines*. The role of the special needs assistants should be included in this policy.

The school has a student-support team that meets informally on a regular basis. This team should be formalised and records should be kept of meetings. As well as the teachers delivering the support, the principal or deputy principal, the guidance counsellor, and a representative of the special needs assistants should be members of the team. There is a need for a clear description of the duties of the special-needs and learning-support coordinator including more supporting documentation for the timetable of the coordinator. The coordinator should convene regular meetings of the student-support team. The coordinator should set up a systematic means of providing teachers with information and advice on the students in their classes who are receiving educational support.

The school's provision for students with additional educational needs involves a substantial proportion of the staff of the school. Having so many teachers involved poses challenges of training, communication and documentation of the support being provided. Communication between the special needs and learning support department and the teachers who provide additional support currently takes place on an informal basis mainly. The number of teachers giving additional support is too large for effective communication and almost all have no training in this area. The criteria used in the selection and assignment of teachers to assist students should be based to a greater extent on meeting the identified needs of the students. There should be a plan for these support classes and provision for formal contact between teachers giving the additional support and students' base teachers for the subjects concerned. The special-education and learning-support department has made a good start in this area with outline plans for the support to be delivered to some of the students. These plans are jointly prepared by the department and the teachers giving the support. This work should be further developed in the short-term and should be supported by the preparation of individual education plans for each student receiving support. While the staff is briefed on the special-needs and learning-support areas at staff meetings, there is a need for more systematic support and briefing of staff by the special-needs and learning-support coordinator between staff meetings to supplement the informal support already being given.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school places a high value on care of its students. Each member of school staff has a responsibility for student care. The school has a formal care team, called the guidance care team, which includes the guidance counsellor, the chaplain, the special-needs and learning-support coordinator, and the principal and deputy principal. The guidance report associated with this report makes recommendations in relation to the school's structures for care and guidance. The class advisors for each class group, the year heads, the social, personal and health education (SPHE) teachers, the learning support team and the fifth year mentors for first-year students also have key roles in student care.

The chaplain and the guidance counsellor have played key roles in initiating the development of a care structure within the school. However this structure needs to be clarified through a description of it in the school's care policy. The draft care policy, which is being drawn up by the school's care team, should involve consultation with parents, students and external agencies as appropriate. The policy, should build on the work already carried out in the areas of suicide prevention, countering bullying, and management of critical incidents. It should also be linked to the school's behaviour policy. The policy should describe the structures for care and their operation. The school's anti-bullying policy should be supported through a short version or code that should be placed in classroom as well as by posters placed around the school.

The school is well aware of the role of SPHE in advancing student care and well being. The school has a coordinator for the subject and most SPHE teachers have received training. The school is conscious of the need to integrate SPHE fully as part of the school's care system so as to maximise its impact. To that end a number of meetings have taken place and the school, including the subject coordinator, is continually evaluating the program and its delivery. The school is aware of the need to formulate policies for SPHE and for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). The school is also aware of the need for suitable accommodation for the subject, in particular arising from its experiential nature. It is proposed that SPHE will be integrated into the general pastoral care system to provide additional support to students and to help minimise disciplinary issues.

The school uses a range of methods for communicating with parents, including the student journal, newsletters, its website, reports, and parent-teacher meetings. The school's newsletter, which has been and continues to be edited by a now retired staff member, is a model of its kind in that it gives each member of the school community a very good insight into the many activities and achievements of the school. It is attractive in its presentation and writing, and is a strength of the school. It is a valuable source of contact between students' homes and school. It was noted that students' journals are well used and are regularly signed by parents and form another valuable contact point between home and school.

Student care is considered by senior management to be such a key area of the school that it keeps it under constant review. School management is keenly aware of the wide range of factors external to the school that can impact on students and hinder their learning. With the leadership of the board of management, which also sees student care as a key priority, and given the progress made to date under the leadership of the principal, it is clear that students' learning will continue to be supported by care that is inspired by the key principles of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The board of management takes an active role in the management of the school and members of the board display a very good knowledge of the school.
- The parents' council is a well-developed body that has made a major contribution to the school in terms of the provision of resources.
- The principal and deputy principal collaborate well and have a high level of communication as shown by their twice-daily formal meetings. The strategic approach that they have led to address the school's accommodation needs is very good practice. Their weekly meeting with assistant principals shows very good practice in sharing leadership and fostering communication.
- The school's student council is a committed body of students who expressed clear ideas and are fully committed to their important role.
- The school community shows a very good sense of responsibility for the environment.
- The school has a well-developed plan that is very well presented. In the past year considerable progress has been made in the development of whole-school policies to guide the school.
- The school delivers a broad curriculum with a system of choices that is student-centred.
- TY students are involved in a wide range of activities and in particular the links with the Sacred Heart Secondary School are strengths of the programme.
- The dedication of many members of staff is evident in the benefit that students take from the sporting activities that take place in the school.
- On the whole in the classes observed students demonstrated a good level of understanding and engagement with the topics under study and were learning.
- The school's newsletter, which has been and continues to be edited by a now retired staff member, is a model of its kind.
- The school places a high value on care of its students. The chaplain and the guidance counsellor have played a key role in initiating the development of a care structure within the school.

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

- The board of management should lead the school in addressing the further development of leadership at all levels in the school in line with the Edmund Rice Schools Trust principles.
- Structures should be set up that would facilitate a whole-school planning process that should be directed by the school's planning coordinator and should support subject-department planning.
- A review should be carried out of the junior cycle curriculum that would examine the time allocation for subjects, especially Irish, English, and Mathematics; the subjects to be included in the junior cycle core curriculum; and the curriculum for the information and communication technology (ICT) programme in second and third years.
- The board of management should lead the drawing up of a policy that would describe the school's practices and give guidance to the staff involved in special education and learning support. There is a need for a clear description of the duties of the special-needs and learning-support coordinator.

- The school's draft care policy, when completed, should be the principal policy in respect of student care and should incorporate within it other draft policies impacting on student care such as the school's anti-bullying policy and when completed the school's critical incident management plan.

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

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of English – 27 November 2009
- Subject Inspection of Geography – 4 February 2009
- Subject Inspection of Guidance – 18 November 2009
- Subject Inspection of Irish – 4 November 2009

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Rice College welcomes the Whole School Evaluation Report. We take reassurance and encouragement from the report and are heartened from affirmation contained therein. We look forward to the challenge of implementing the recommendations of the report.

The Board of Management notes the acknowledgement that the evaluation was carried out during a period of industrial action and as such may have limited teacher input into the evaluation.

Our school has faced traumatic and distressing events in recent times. It is our hope that the Department of Education and Skills will recognise our circumstances and continue to allocate appropriate resources in order to meet the needs of the students in our care.