A whole-school evaluation of Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir was undertaken in May 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in English, German and Business subjects were evaluated in detail. An evaluation of the provision of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was also completed in advance of the evaluation. Separate reports are available on these evaluations. (See section 7 for details). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

INTRODUCTION

Scoil Mhuire is an all-girls voluntary secondary school located on the outskirts of Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary. The school, originally founded by the Mercy order in 1874, is now situated in the Greenhill area, having relocated from its original site in the town centre in 1974. The school is under the trusteeship of Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust (CEIST).

Due to its particular location, the school also welcomes students from parts of the nearby counties of Waterford and Kilkenny. Much of this catchment area is designated disadvantaged under the Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) and Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais (CLÁR) programmes.

The school provides the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the LCA programme for its students. The school has a broad intake of students with varying abilities from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Student intake has increased steadily over the past number of years resulting in the current enrolment of 431 students.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The educational provision in Scoil Mhuire is underpinned by its mission statement which asserts that the school ‘is a Christian, caring community which encourages the integrated development of every individual concerned’ and which is clearly articulated and communicated to all stakeholders. In addition, the school remains true to its original Mercy ethos, particularly in relation to catering for students who are disadvantaged and marginalised, through the various support structures embedded in the daily operation of the school.

Many of the core values of the CEIST charter are also apparent in the activities that occur on a regular basis in the school and in the policies and procedures governing its operation. This commitment to the CEIST charter is characterised by the promotion of spiritual and human development through the integration of liturgical celebrations throughout the year, the full inclusion of religious education on the curriculum and the commitment to the delivery of appropriate guidance, Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationship and Sexuality Education programmes. Respect for every person is seen as a core value and an affinity with the school and acknowledgement of each person’s individual contribution was evident throughout the school community. Another aspect of the CEIST charter, the commitment to improve the quality of teaching and learning, was apparent in the openness
to evaluation and improvement displayed particularly at trustee, board of management and senior management levels.

CEIST has taken steps to actively promote and foster the school’s characteristic spirit, primarily through its faith development structures. These supports provide the school with access to assistance and a variety of resources geared specifically to promoting the Catholic educational ethos of the school. CEIST has also initiated plans to further develop a culture of leadership at school level through the preparation of courses for current and prospective middle managers and school leaders. These supports and initiatives are commended.

1.2 School ownership and management

The school is managed through an appropriately constituted and conscientiously run board of management. All members of the board are aware of their obligations and responsibilities. Their attendance at appropriate training courses provided by the various nominating bodies has been instrumental in the development of the group’s awareness and fulfilment of their combined roles and responsibilities.

The board has developed clear lines of communication with CEIST and with the school’s teaching staff. To further improve the overall level of communication, the board should also consider providing agreed reports on board meetings to the parent and student representative bodies.

The board oversees school policy development and has ratified most of the legally required policies. However the board should ensure that the draft special educational needs policy is further developed and ratified as a matter of urgency.

The board has identified a number of developmental priorities for the school. These priorities include ongoing improvement to school buildings; development of the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and skill base within the school; and the further development of leadership roles among members of staff to enhance its existing middle-management structures. The identification of these priorities is laudable and the realisation of each goal would have considerable benefits for the school. In order to achieve the goals identified by the board and to address recommendations outlined in this report, the attention of the board is drawn to the need actively to engage in meaningful school development planning by identifying specific, attainable, realistic and time-bound objectives. This planning should be monitored, reviewed and evaluated periodically by the board to ascertain progress and to ensure that each objective is realised within an appropriate timeframe.

1.3 In-school management

The in-school management team consists of the senior management team of principal and deputy principal and the middle management team of four assistant principals and nine special duties teachers. The present middle management team has reduced in size owing to a number of recent retirements; this is a reduction of four assistant principals, three special duties teachers and one programme co-ordinator since the 2008/2009 school year.

The principal and deputy principal presented as a complementary team with the combined skills to progress the school in the appropriate direction. The principal, having served in a temporary capacity since 2004, was appointed to the position on a permanent basis in 2009. The deputy principal was also appointed at the beginning of the 2009/2010 academic year. This relatively new partnership has developed a positive working relationship founded on a commitment and dedication to the school and its students.
The senior management team has actively pursued and accessed appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) training courses in leadership and management through its engagement with the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) support service and through further studies. This commitment to training and professional development at senior management level is highly commended.

The principal displays clear leadership qualities coupled with an appreciation of, and an adherence to, the founding principles of the school. The principal’s vision for the future development of the school is based upon maintaining the very high standards of student support in the school and continually improving the standards of teaching and learning. In order to progress these worthy aspirations it is essential that the senior management team, and particularly the principal, ensure that an appropriate balance is established and maintained between the role of day-to-day management and that of instructional leadership. The need to achieve this balance, coupled with the recent reduction in middle management positions in the school, highlights the need for a full re-prioritisation of the duties attached to the school’s post of responsibility structure. This re-prioritisation should pay particular attention to the most essential curricular, administrative and pastoral needs of the school.

Since being appointed, the deputy principal has taken considerable steps in up-skilling and continues to carry out previously assigned duties and tasks. This openness to further responsibility and commitment to the school is commended and, in time, will help to re-define the leadership and management roles at senior and middle management levels.

Contracts outlining the main duties associated with posts of responsibility are maintained by senior management. This is good practice. To further improve the efficiency, effectiveness and benefit of tasks associated with posts of responsibility, each member of the middle management team should be encouraged to partake in an end-of-year review with a view to improving and developing each post of responsibility. This form of review should be seen as an opportunity for the post-holder to communicate any issues or areas for development with senior management with the ultimate goal of improving educational provision in the school.

The school’s four assistant principals together with the senior management team currently take responsibility for the six year-head positions in the school. This team works very well and liaises effectively with the relevant class tutors. The scheduling of weekly meetings for this group is very good practice and provides a forum for pertinent issues to be discussed at middle management level. These meetings also provide an opportunity for the further development of distributed leadership among assistant principals.

A wide variety of duties is attached to the roles of the nine special duties teachers. These duties include the co-ordination of: Religious Education, the school book scheme and the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) programme. It was reported that all special duties posts are functioning effectively; however it is recommended that the school’s entire schedule of duties should be included in the proposed re-prioritisation of posts in order to maximise the resources at management’s disposal.

CPD is valued and encouraged by the senior management team. The entire teaching staff has been exposed to a variety of CPD opportunities and has benefited accordingly. Senior management has also identified a number of specific areas for future development, such as timetabling, educational inclusion and school development planning (SDP). The further development of the school as a learning community is encouraged.

The school’s admissions and enrolment policy is true to the school’s ethos. The policy is clear and unambiguous. The school’s practice in relation to admissions and enrolment is
similarly inclusive. The school reports that it has never refused admission to a student and makes every effort to accommodate students who wish to transfer to the school.

Students were seen to be very well behaved. A clear ladder of referral is built into the school’s code of behaviour, and students and parents alike expressed their overall satisfaction with the code. Where misbehaviour occurs there are appropriate sanctions in place and these sanctions are managed very effectively. To incentivise positive student behaviour the school has developed a number of initiatives including awarding credit slips and key rings for good behaviour and recognition of student achievement at assemblies, over the school’s intercom and at the end-of-year awards ceremonies. The increased use of these worthwhile initiatives was highlighted by students and parents as an area for further development in the school.

Rosters are maintained to ensure that students are adequately supervised at all times. The senior management team is involved in these supervisory duties on a daily basis. Concerns expressed to inspectors by some parents and students regarding occasional incidents at the locker areas, particularly at break times, were brought to the attention of the senior management team. A reconfiguration of the locker areas in order to alleviate over-crowding at particular times during the day is suggested.

The students’ council has been in existence in Scoil Mhuire for many years. Currently a special duties teacher acts as the students’ council liaison teacher and takes responsibility for promoting the activities of the council, advising and assisting members of the council in their duties and facilitating the council in making the appropriate links with the various partners for particular activities. Until recently the students’ council was made up of senior students. In 2009 this was reviewed and now the council is a fully representative body with students from each year group. This reorganisation is commended. Over the years, the students’ council has been actively engaged in a wide variety of events and activities such as: surveying students’ needs; suggesting improvement to student facilities; consultation on relevant school policies; fundraising; and representative duties at official functions. To continue the positive development of the students’ council, the liaison teacher, in collaboration with the council’s officers, should access the wide variety of online resources available on the students’ council support service website www.studentcouncil.ie.

The school has developed very clear procedures to identify student absenteeism. These procedures are very effective and are successful due to the combined efforts of students, class tutors, year heads and the administrative staff. Very good records of student absenteeism are presented to the school’s Education Welfare Officer (EWO) and tailored strategies to promote attendance among repeat offenders are identified and followed through in a collaborative approach with the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB).

Student retention rates in the school are very good. It is noteworthy that senior management was acutely aware of the current status of students who either transferred to another school from Scoil Mhuire or left school entirely. The school’s continued care for students intent on leaving school also shows a significant level of support, especially for those particularly in need of advice and guidance. The school has developed links with the ‘Pathways’ programme for early school-leavers in nearby Waterford and the local Youthreach centre in order to ensure that students who do leave school before completing their programme of study receive appropriate care and direction elsewhere. This ongoing care is commended.

The parents’ association is an active group primarily involved in a variety of fundraising activities. The association also plays an important role in school policy development and has been consulted during the development of a variety of draft school policies. In addition to these activities, the parents’ association is often centrally involved in organising and catering for the various social gatherings that occur during the school year. Parents
expressed their satisfaction with the quality and promptness of school communications and particularly with the quality of information provided by teachers in relation to their daughters’ progress at parent teacher meetings.

The school has developed a number of links with local community and sporting organisations. These mutually beneficial links help to embed the school within its community and in some cases add considerable value to the existing supports provided for students in the school. Examples of such links include ties with the Neighbourhood Youth Project, Local Education Network and the Suir Valley Community-Based Drug Initiative.

1.4 Management of resources

The school currently employs thirty-five teachers on a full-time or part-time basis. It has an official allocation of 31.82 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTE) and is currently operating within this allocation. Due to increased enrolments and the recent retirement of a number of teachers, the school now finds itself within quota for the first time in many years. This situation provides senior management with the opportunity to recruit and deploy teachers in a more planned and strategic manner. This will have a significantly positive effect on the composition of subject departments and on the deployment of teachers to their particular areas of qualification. To ensure that this opportunity is seized the senior management team should survey the skills, interests and qualifications of the teaching staff to fully ascertain the considerable breadth and balance of the skill sets at its disposal.

A policy of rotation is used in almost all cases to deploy teachers to subjects and levels thereby ensuring that teachers are exposed to teaching all levels in the various curricular programmes. This good practice is commended. In some instances, two teachers are deployed to teach one particular group at certain times during the week. Currently, this involves splitting the group, thereby reducing the student-teacher ratio. While a commendable practice, its implementation should be regularly reviewed to ensure that students’ outcomes are improved due to the intervention. Depending on the outcome of the reviews other options could then be considered in order to achieve as many benefits from this valuable resource as possible.

The school’s ancillary staff take an active role in the school and form an integral part of the school community. A number are involved in additional areas of school business such as break-time supervision and the supervision of after-school study. This integration of support staff into the everyday activities within the school is further evidence of the community ethos of Scoil Mhuire.

The board has identified the improvement of school buildings as an area for development and has recently tendered for the upgrade of electrical works and the relevant fittings under the Department’s emergency works scheme. This work, planned to be completed in 2011, will undoubtedly improve the school’s infrastructure. In addition, and upon completion of the emergency works, the board also plans to initiate the redevelopment of the school’s roof, possibly under the Department’s summer works scheme (SWS). The ongoing development of the school site within the parameters of the various departmental schemes is commended.

The school grounds are very well maintained and the wide variety of students’ artwork displayed in the school creates a visually appealing environment. The encouragement of students to take an active role in improving the school environment by planting flowers and providing seating in the grounds is commended and should be extended to as many areas as possible.
ICT is well integrated at an administrative level in the school with a number of tasks streamlined through the efficient utilisation of technology. An acceptable usage policy (AUP) is in place but the school would benefit from the development of a broader ICT strategy, including a full inventory of ICT equipment to identify the areas for development within the school, especially in a teaching and learning context. The board should instigate the development of such a strategy using the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) publication “Planning and Implementing e-Learning in your school”.

Recently a green schools committee has been formed and this group has already heightened student and staff awareness of the green issues affecting the school. Initial activities have included labelling bins for specified waste and the organisation of a visit of a speaker from Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Ireland. These green initiatives are commended.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School Development Planning (SDP) has been formally in place in Scoil Mhuire since 2004. In recent years however, some aspects of SDP have lost impetus and direction. While it is recognised and commended that a member of the teaching staff attends local SDP cluster meetings, there is currently no co-ordinated approach to school planning, particularly in relation to subject planning and strategic planning. To improve school planning in an organised and structured manner, an SDP co-ordinator role with responsibility for devising and implementing strategies to achieve the board’s priorities should be established. The SDP co-ordinator should progress subject and programme planning in a uniform manner throughout the school and across all subject departments.

Policy development is an area of strength in the school with most of the required policies in place and ratified by the board. Ratification dates are clearly displayed on each policy’s cover page and a number of the school’s earlier policies have been reviewed as is good practice. There has also been a good level of collaboration with regard to policy development in the school and working groups have been formed to prepare draft policy documents for circulation among the school’s stakeholders. This form of review and development has involved the formation of focus groups at board level, at staff meetings, and with representatives of the parent and student representative bodies. These focus groups have provided their own particular inputs to relevant policy documents and have strengthened the ownership and implementation of such policies. This model of policy review and development should be continued with the possibility of identifying timeframes for all policies in need of immediate, medium-term and long-term review.

While the quality of the permanent section of the school plan is acknowledged, the developmental section requires attention. In order to bring the board’s identified priorities to fruition, the proposed SDP co-ordinator, in collaboration with the board and the senior management team, should develop appropriate action plans. These action plans would provide structure and accountability and would also provide the opportunity to regularly review and evaluate progress. Information regarding SDP is readily available at www.sdpi.ie.

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.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Scoil Mhuire offers the full range of curricular programmes available to it and provides a wide range of subjects and levels to accommodate the needs and interests of its students and meets Department of Education and Skills requirements regarding the provision of Civic, Social and Political Education and Social, Personal and Health Education. To supplement the variety of optional subjects on offer, the school also provides two modern European languages, three business subjects and three science subjects at senior cycle. This range of subjects is suitably diverse and helps to ensure that students’ skills, needs and aptitudes are appropriately catered for. Students have good access to levels within subjects and school management organises its resources to facilitate this through the concurrent timetabling of some core subjects from first year and through the scheduling of classes of mixed ability in other subject areas. This is very good practice. Good collaboration and communication with another local secondary school also helps to broaden students’ choices by enabling them to study minority subjects currently unavailable in Scoil Mhuire. This mutually beneficial arrangement is commended.

In some core subjects students are placed in groups of similar ability after first year. This policy should be reviewed with a view to delaying setting until the beginning of third year in order to reduce the tendency to focus on examination preparation and to promote the higher level courses among students. As concurrent timetabling is in operation for some core subjects, the relevant subject departments should plan to utilise this valuable resource effectively through further emphasis on collaborative planning in relation to planned learning outcomes, common teaching and learning strategies and assessments.

The majority of class groups are timetabled for forty-five class periods each week. This allows senior management to schedule each class group with five periods in English, Irish and Mathematics at junior cycle. At senior cycle, all examination subjects are timetabled for five periods per week. This ensures regular class contact time with specialist teachers and promotes continuity in subject areas such as modern European languages and Irish. An analysis of the school’s timetable demonstrated that in most cases subjects are well dispersed throughout the week and optional subjects are offered in a combination of double and single periods, as is best practice.

The minimum requirement of twenty-eight hours weekly tuition time has not been achieved for all students. All LCA students and some students at senior cycle who are scheduled for ‘study periods’ fall short of this requirement. In addition, the current system of staggering the return of year groups at the beginning of the school year, coupled with an early finishing date, particularly for TY students, results in a considerable erosion of students’ time in school. The school authorities are advised of the need to remedy these deficits as soon as possible.

While an optional programme in Scoil Mhuire, the majority of students choose Transition Year (TY) and the school normally runs two TY class groups per year. The TY curriculum provides a good blend of academic and activity-based learning opportunities. These activities are well dispersed throughout the year providing both class groups with a common experience of the programme. Currently, not all TY students take a science module. The school should review this policy and explore all possible opportunities to
enable all TY students to sample an interesting and experiential science module. The TY core team is currently exploring the idea of introducing a reflective journal as part of its student assessment procedures. This is a worthwhile plan and should be implemented without delay. The TY co-ordinator should also furnish the board of management with an up-to-date TY plan annually, and this good practice could also be extended to all other curricular and pastoral programmes in the school.

The co-ordination duties for the LCVP are currently undertaken by the teachers of business subjects who are also deployed to teach the link modules. The co-ordination team has accessed appropriate CPD and this is commended. Currently, all students whose subject choices enable them to qualify for the LCVP may choose to participate in the programme. Students are informed of their options in relation to the modern European language component and the various vocational subject groupings prior to choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects. This is good practice. Student outcomes within the programme are good with a high level of merit awards and a very low unsuccessful rate.

The school’s LCA programme is co-ordinated effectively. A decision was recently made by the board to offer the LCA programme every second year. The board should monitor this change in provision and reinstate the programme on an annual basis if possible, in order to safeguard the principle of equality of access. A full report on the provision of the LCA programme in Scoil Mhuire is available separately.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Many efforts are made to maximise students’ subject choices and to ensure that students and parents are fully informed at these important decision making times. During the year, open evenings are held for both junior and senior cycle students. At these events, students’ options are discussed and the various subject and programme choices are explained in detail. In addition to these open evenings, a subject fair is held for senior cycle students allowing them to discuss, in an informal setting, their optional subjects with the relevant subject specialist teachers. This positive initiative is very well received by students.

Very good systems have been developed by the school to assist students with their optional subject choices. Prior to entry, first-year students’ preferences are surveyed. Based on the results of these surveys, senior management forms optional subject bands. These optional subject bands vary from year to year. However, students are still given the opportunity to sample all of the optional subjects in each band and make their final subject choices prior to the October mid-term break. To assist students’ decision-making, all first-year classes are allocated two class periods with the guidance counsellor prior to the subject choice deadline in addition to individual appointments if necessary. In some cases, students’ preferences dictate that some subjects may appear in more than one band. In these cases subject departments plan collaboratively to ensure that repetition is minimised and that students are given every opportunity to make fully informed decisions. During the evaluation students expressed satisfaction with this subject-sampling programme.

As TY is optional in Scoil Mhuire, some students do not have the opportunity to avail of the subject sampling component of the programme. In this case third-year students who do not intend to take part in TY are allocated two group sessions with the school’s guidance counsellors prior to choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects. These students also attend the school’s senior cycle options evening where all senior cycle curricular programmes are discussed fully.

The various activities embedded in the school’s calendar to inform students and parents of the subject and programme choices available to them are commended.
3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

A wide variety of co-curricular activities is organised in the school to enhance and support learning in the applicable subject areas. Examples of these activities include a traditional music group, school choir, participation in local and national art competitions, involvement in the Gaisce award, participation in Seachtain na Gaeilge, the provision of a homework club, and after-school study and trips to theatrical events and plays. When carefully chosen, these activities provide students with a varied and multi-faceted experience of the subjects that they are linked to. This approach adds value to class work, heightens students’ understanding and helps them to contextualise subject matter.

In addition to the co-curricular activities that occur during the year a good range of extra-curricular activities helps to enrich students’ experiences in Scoil Mhuire. These activities, while primarily sporting, develop a pride in the school among its students and also promote personal development and communication. Some examples of these activities include soccer, Gaelic football, equestrian events and chess.

The school has developed a policy on extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that identifies the purpose of organised activities, promotes student participation, provides students and teachers with clarity regarding the organisation and involvement in trips and activities and defines the roles of all stakeholders in the school’s extra-curricular and co-curricular programmes. The development of such a policy is commended. However some parents and students expressed concerns regarding issues such as student participation, involvement in competitions and student absenteeism as a result of organised activities. It may now be prudent to review this policy collaboratively with all relevant parties to identify any shortfalls in its implementation.

4. Quality of learning and teaching in subjects

4.1 Planning and preparation

Some subject departments have identified subject co-ordinators to facilitate effective planning. These structures promote collaborative planning and should be extended to all subject areas. Subject departments are afforded the opportunity to meet periodically throughout the year and some meet regularly on an informal basis to discuss day-to-day planning and organisational issues. These meetings provide teachers with a good opportunity to plan collaboratively for the delivery of their subject. However, it was noted that the degree of collaborative planning varied considerably. Such planning should now be regarded as a priority area for development for all subject departments and should be carried out in a manner that seeks to inform and develop effective teaching and learning practices.

Of the subject plans inspected, the majority contained most of the required elements of good quality planning. In some cases, planning material should be collated into one cohesive plan in order to centralise the documentation and policies associated with individual subjects and programmes. Best practice was observed where curriculum plans were directly linked to student learning outcomes and where interventions for students with special educational needs were clearly outlined. In some cases, subject plans consisted only of lists of curricular topics, Department circulars and inventories of resources. Where this is the case, the need for subject departments to engage in meaningful planning as a matter of urgency is indicated.
The level of individual planning for lessons observed was very good. This planning included the preparation of practical lessons, organisation of a variety of supplementary teaching aids and the careful scheduling of a number of learning activities in some lessons.

4.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching observed during the evaluation was good in almost all instances. Most lessons were clearly presented, structured and paced at an appropriate level for students. In some instances, learning outcomes were shared with students at the beginning of lessons. This practice helped students to identify the success criteria for lessons and to evaluate their learning. The sharing of learning outcomes with students at the beginning of lessons should be extended to all subject areas. Classroom management was good in all instances and students were co-operative throughout the evaluation. Where ICT was utilised students were seen to benefit from its judicious use.

A wide range of appropriate teaching and learning strategies was observed. These strategies encompassed a variety of effective traditional and active learning methodologies. To ensure that all students share similar experiences and are exposed to an appropriate blend of teaching and learning styles, each subject department should now identify the most suitable strategies to achieve the desired learning outcomes particular to their subject. To that end, subject departments should develop a skills inventory and work collaboratively in the sharing and development of teaching and learning strategies with the overall goal of improving the delivery of their subject.

In some instances, student participation and engagement in dialogue and discussion was minimal. Targeted strategies should be utilised to address student passivity and lack of participation wherever it occurs. Such strategies are currently deployed to excellent effect by some teachers and include co-operative learning, ‘think-pair-share’ and role play. By adopting these strategies students could be encouraged to engage more actively in their learning and to express personal responses more confidently.

A wide range of questioning strategies was employed during lessons observed. Best practice was observed when questions were differentiated according to students’ abilities and were targeted at individual students. In some cases students were not given enough time to reflect or to form opinions when questioned. Where this occurs it is imperative that teachers provide students with the appropriate time and support to participate fully in the desired discussions and dialogue.

Overall, student learning was observed to be good. Students demonstrated a clear understanding of key principles in various lessons and were, in most cases, able to articulate their views clearly when questioned.

Uptake of higher level in most subjects is good and in some cases very good. Student attainment in certificate examinations is generally good and in some cases excellent. A detailed analysis of the school’s recent certificate examination results showed that in a minority of subjects attainment at ordinary level was particularly high. The school should examine this trend and put strategies in place to promote the increased uptake of higher level where students demonstrate the required capacity.

4.3 Assessment

Formal assessments take place in Scoil Mhuire twice a year. In addition to these assessments, examination-year students sit ‘mock’ examinations in the spring time. Results of informal tests administered in some subjects were made available during the evaluation and these results are used to help inform teachers of students’ learning.
Good assessment practices were observed where the students’ written work was monitored and formative feedback was used to help students to identify areas for improvement. These and other assessment for learning techniques should be incorporated into all subject areas where appropriate. The vast majority of students’ copybooks, folders and journals were observed to be neat and very well maintained. Students and teachers are commended for the very high standards maintained in written work.

The use of common assessments was commended by inspectors as they support an agreed, skills-based approach to the planning and the delivery of subjects. The incorporation of oral examinations in modern European languages was also commended as good practice as it encourages the development of students’ oral language proficiency.

5. **Quality of Support for Students**

5.1 **Inclusion of students with additional educational needs**

The school, in line with its statutory requirements, has included in its admission and enrolment policy the procedures to be adhered to in relation to students with special educational needs. The school should also ensure that the procedures and protocols relating to students with additional educational needs that are ingrained in its daily practices are formalised in a policy document. The process of developing the school’s draft special educational needs policy, in a collaborative and systematic manner, would act as a catalyst for debate and discussion among all stakeholders. This would be a positive outcome and would encourage the full implementation and ownership of the policy, which should be developed in the spirit of the school’s ethos and mission statement. Information regarding the development of a special educational needs policy is available in the Department of Education and Science publication ‘Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post Primary Guidelines’. Additional advice and guidance is also available from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

The school has developed very good procedures to help with the identification of students in need of additional educational support. These procedures include timely requests to parents to supply relevant information; consultation with educational psychologists regarding individuals; liaison with the students’ feeder primary school teachers; and administering standardised reasoning and reading tests early in September. To further develop these good practices, and to develop a more output-focused educational support structure, re-assessment of students should be introduced periodically in order to accurately ascertain students’ progress and, therefore, to inform teaching practices.

The co-ordination of supports for students with special educational needs is devolved primarily to the school’s learning support teacher who is qualified in the area of special educational needs and is also deployed to teach almost all learning support groups. This is good practice. Fourteen teachers are currently deployed to teach resource classes. This number should be considerably reduced in order to develop a specialised core team. Once identified, this small core team could begin to further develop the planning, organisation, communication and delivery of the educational support programmes in the school.

A full register of students in receipt of learning support and SEN support is maintained by the school. This very good practice allows for the effective planning, scheduling and delivery of the educational support programmes. An analysis of this register demonstrated that all educational support resources are utilised fully and for their intended purposes.
The expertise of the educational support team and that of individual subject teachers has helped in the identification of a variety of very useful strategies and initiatives designed to improve the experience of students with additional educational needs. Examples of these supports include subject-specific information sheets used during resource classes; the use of social stories for students with autism; the promotion of mind-mapping in mainstream lessons; and a number of specific reading interventions. The proposed development of a core educational support team will further help in identifying such strategies and interventions and communicating them to all subject teachers. The mainstreaming of these supports will enable all teachers to have a role in improving educational inclusion within their specific subject areas.

The modes of delivery used to provide additional educational supports in Scoil Mhuire are primarily one-to-one and small group teaching. The school’s learning support programme at junior cycle is delivered parallel to an optional subject band. Organising the curriculum in this manner ensures continuity and allows students to sample the various optional subjects prior to the formal timetabling of learning support and resource lessons. However, it does have the additional consequence of reducing students’ opportunities to access the full range of subjects. It was reported that this decision is taken in full consultation with parents and is carried out on an individual basis as is good practice. At senior cycle, students in receipt of learning support access additional help during Irish and a number of optional subjects These supports are often subject specific and delivered by subject specialist teachers. Students who are allocated resource hours to meet identified needs generally receive this support on a withdrawal basis.

To further improve the provision of educational supports for students, senior management and the proposed core educational support team should promote flexibility in relation to the most appropriate modes of delivery of additional educational supports. Modes of delivery such as co-operative teaching, co-operative learning and group work should be considered and planned from an early stage, particularly when framing the school’s timetable. The decision to introduce new modes of delivery or discontinue existing modes of delivery should be discussed fully and be based on a quantifiable improvement or deterioration in students’ learning.

Students learning English as an additional language (EAL) are assessed upon entry to the school using the post-primary assessment kit in order to determine their proficiency in the English language. Those students who are deemed to require EAL support are withdrawn from all Irish classes and from a range of other subject areas until Christmas in first year. During this intensive course students receive support from a teacher trained in the area of EAL provision. After Christmas in first year, students who qualify for learning support are then integrated into the school’s ongoing learning support programme. The success rate of this intervention should be continually reviewed to ensure that it meets the very specific needs of students learning English as an additional language.

A number of online resources have been identified to assist in EAL students’ integration into school life. In addition, some subject departments have taken steps to help EAL students with this transition by translating commonly used subject-specific keywords and phrases. The school has made significant efforts to recognise the language diversity of parents by using a variety of languages in its communication with parents and by hosting an English language course in the school for parents and members of the local community. These initiatives are commended.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

A guidance plan outlines the various components of the school’s guidance programme. This good quality plan outlines the organisation of guidance provision for all year groups,
details the procedures for meeting students and parents, lists the assessment arrangements for students and identifies specific links with school personnel and external agencies. A considerable quantity of supplementary information pertaining to the day-to-day guidance activities undertaken in the school was also noted. This information is collated in an organised manner allowing all members of the guidance team to access these important resources and support materials readily. The school’s guidance suite provides the guidance team and students with a well-equipped centrally located resource area that is conducive to the delivery of a wide variety of guidance-specific activities such as career research, group discussions and individual counselling.

The school is allocated 0.5 WTE for guidance and an additional 0.5 WTE under the Guidance Enhancement Initiative (GEI). These allocations are utilised through the deployment of two qualified guidance counsellors, on a job-sharing basis, to oversee the effective co-ordination of guidance for students in the school. The guidance counsellors’ timetables are constructed in a manner that avoids any shortfall in provision and also ensures that both guidance counsellors are available to attend the weekly pastoral care team meeting. In addition to the school’s guidance counsellors, guidance provision in the school is administered on a whole-school basis through the various interventions of key personnel including class tutors, year heads and the SPHE team. In addition to these in-school supports, external agencies are employed to provide assistance occasionally. One particular example of external supports, provided in this case by NEPS, is the development of behaviour modification programmes for students experiencing difficulties in this area. The use of such interventions that promote student responsibility and goal setting to encourage improved behaviour is commended.

The school’s guidance programme provides students with access to a good blend of educational, personal and vocational guidance. This is structured appropriately with a considerable emphasis placed on incoming first-year students who receive a variety of supports prior to entry and during their first year in the school. The overall management of students’ transitions is delivered in a structured format that ensures that parents and students have ample opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion and dialogue regarding the options available to them. The commitment to promoting further education among senior cycle students through specific interventions and through the organisation of useful information briefings is commended.

All senior cycle class groups are timetabled for the appropriate number of guidance lessons each week depending upon their particular programme of study. To complement this timetabled provision, a referral system, through the pastoral care team, is also utilised to good effect enabling the guidance team to engage in personal counselling with students. The school’s chaplain supplements the work of the guidance team in this respect and assists in providing all members of the school community with an additional support structure.

The school’s pastoral systems and practices are of a very high quality. The class tutor and year head system is long established and embedded in the pastoral supports of Scoil Mhuire. Class tutors meet their class groups each morning and these sessions are used to reiterate and to promote many aspects of the school’s ethos particularly in relation to social and moral education. During this time, each year head is available in a centralised area to meet individual students and to discuss any pertinent issues. This regular contact between students and their class tutors and year heads helps to develop a close bond and further underpins the school’s caring, community ethos.

The pastoral care team, consisting of the principal, deputy principal, guidance counsellors and learning support teacher meet on a weekly basis. At these meetings student welfare issues and individual students’ progress are discussed. This team is the focal point for the identification of external supports for individual students and liaises with a number of
support agencies to plan, implement and evaluate the success of interventions taken. The school is commended for developing and maintaining support structures that serve its students very well.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Scoil Mhuire’s trustee body, senior management team and staff are fully committed to providing its students with an education as advocated in the school’s mission statement.
- The principal and deputy principal present as a complementary team with the required skills to manage and lead the school as a community of learning.
- The school’s system of policy formulation has resulted in the development and review of a wide variety of required and desirable policy documents.
- Students in Scoil Mhuire are offered a wide variety of subjects and programmes and receive appropriate and timely information regarding their options.
- The school’s committed teaching staff has contributed considerably to the overall quality of student learning and to the subsequent levels of attainment in certificate examinations.
- The pastoral care system in Scoil Mhuire provides students with excellent supports during their time in the school.

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

- The attention of the board of management is drawn to the need to develop strategic plans to achieve its objectives and those identified as priorities within this report.
- The senior management team should endeavour to achieve an appropriate balance between the day-to-day management and the instructional leadership of the school.
- The school should review its post of responsibility structures with a view to ensuring that the current pastoral, curricular and administrative needs of the school are catered for.
- Collaborative subject planning should form part of each subject department’s core role with a significant emphasis on developing and varying students’ learning experiences.
- To further improve the provision of educational supports for students, senior management and the proposed core educational support team should promote flexibility in relation to the most appropriate modes of delivery of additional educational supports.

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 and Programme Evaluation reports are available:

- LCA Programme Evaluation – 10 December 2009
- Subject Inspection of English – 5 May 2010
- Subject Inspection of Business subjects – 7 May 2010
- Subject Inspection German – 10 May 2010

Published May 2011