An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Coláiste Íosagáin
Portarlington, Co. Laois
Roll number: 68068R

Date of inspection: 23 November 2009
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Coláiste Íosagáin 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

INTRODUCTION

Coláiste Íosagáin is a co-educational Catholic voluntary secondary school. It came into being as a result of the amalgamation of St. Joseph’s Christian Brothers’ secondary school and Scoil Mhuire Presentation secondary school. The amalgamation took place in 2000 and the school is now the sole provider of second-level education in Portarlington and its immediate hinterland. Initially, the school operated under the joint trusteeship of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Sisters. In 2005, the Presentation Sisters assumed sole trusteeship of the school and in 2008 trusteeship was transferred to Ceist (Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust).

The school draws its students from a large number of primary schools in the town of Portarlington and the surrounding area. The school provides a broad and balanced educational experience for its students and welcomes students from a wide variety of social, cultural and educational backgrounds.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school’s mission statement was created during the amalgamation and reflects the educational philosophy of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Sisters. The school has a very strong pastoral ethos and operates in an atmosphere underpinned by respect for the individual and characterised by good interpersonal relationships.

The characteristic spirit of the school is evident from the orderly manner in which the school operates and the commitment of management and staff to the school and to the provision of a holistic educational experience for all of its students. All of the school’s policies are framed with reference to the vision statement and reflect the ethos of the school. The Christian values at the core of the school’s ethos are given expression through the regular celebration of religious services, the provision of religious education classes and through the activities of the chaplains, in tandem with the school’s faith development team.

The school’s patron promotes the characteristic spirit of the school and maintains close contact with the school’s management. The principal provides the patron with regular written reports and the school enjoys the support of a school relationship co-ordinator provided by Ceist.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is in the second year of a three-year term. It is properly constituted, boasts a commendable level of expertise and has received appropriate training. The board of management is a key strength of the school. It is very well organised and its members are very well informed about the operation of the school and are committed to its
ongoing development. The board is actively involved in the life of the school and liaises very effectively with all of the school’s stakeholders and the wider community.

The work of the board is enhanced through the activities of a number of sub-committees. A permanent finance sub-committee, which oversees expenditure and harmonises the school’s accounts, is in place. Sub-committees to administer appointments and to facilitate policy development are established as needs arise.

The board plays an effective role in supporting school development planning and practices in relation to the development and review of policies are thorough and inclusive. Following a review of the needs of the school and an analysis of the changing demographics in the school’s hinterland, it was decided that the existing admissions policy be reviewed. A sub-committee to lead the review is in place. It is recommended that, in addition to amending the admission criteria to cater equitably for the anticipated increase in applications, the review should address the reference to the conditions attaching to the admission of students with special educational needs contained in the existing policy.

Leading teaching and learning is also a key function of the board. In order to address this, the board annually circulates each subject department with the details of student performance in the state examinations and invites the departments to analyse the data and to submit a report to the board. This very good practice reinforces a culture of reflection and analysis in subject department planning and is highly commended.

1.3 In-school management

The senior management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, operates in a collaborative manner, maintains a visible and effective presence in and around the school and boasts a very good balance of complementary skills. The open and supportive attitude of senior management towards the staff and students is reflected in the calm and orderly manner in which the school operates and the pastoral and caring attitude that permeates all of the school’s activities. The senior management team has agreed delineated management roles and meet regularly to review progress and to discuss any issues that arise. Given that the team is new and in order to ensure that the agreed roles most appropriately reflect the balance of skills in the team, it is recommended that an annual review of the roles be conducted. An agreed written role descriptor should emerge from the review.

The middle management team of assistant principles and special duties teachers provides valuable support to the senior management team and contributes effectively to the operation of the school. The schedule of posts is reviewed every two years and the review process is comprehensive, inclusive and transparent. The next review should ensure that roles and responsibilities of each member of the middle management team are clearly defined and documented and that the duplication of roles is avoided. There are good structures in place to support the operation of the middle management team and to develop the roles of each member of the team. Very good progress in redefining the roles of the year heads has already been made while there is scope to rationalise and develop the roles associated with the remaining posts.

The school’s parents’ council was established to coincide with the amalgamation. The school’s catchment area is divided into seven regions for the purpose of elections to the parents’ council and two parents are elected from each region. The parents’ representatives to the board of management are elected at the annual general meeting of the parents’ council. The parents’ council describes its role as promoting closer co-operation between school and home and assisting in enhancing the educational and personal welfare of all of the school’s students. To this end, the council provides funding and other supports for the school’s various activities and collaborates with management in agreeing areas for
development. The council maintains very close links with the school’s senior management team. The principal attends all of the council’s meetings, consults with the members of the council in relation to policy development and delivers the agreed reports from the board of management meetings.

The school communicates very effectively with parents, staff and students. The staff representatives on the board of management brief the staff following each meeting of the board. The staff handbook and the student journal are also used to very good effect in facilitating ongoing communication. Regular staff meetings and parent-teacher meetings are held. The school’s website could be more effectively used in communicating with the school and wider community. In order to fully exploit the potential of this medium, it is recommended that the school’s website be updated and that, in designing the new website, due account be taken of the diverse social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the student and parent body.

Arrangements in place to manage the student body and to promote positive attitudes and behaviour are very good. The school is very well ordered. Student behaviour on the school corridors between classes and during the morning and lunch breaks is very good. Management and staff maintain an effective presence around the school and interactions between the staff and students and between the students themselves are respectful and courteous. The school’s code of behaviour is unambiguous. It is based on the value system at the core of the school’s ethos and has a clear ladder of referral. The class teachers, tutors and year heads all play well-defined roles in managing the code and in ensuring that the pastoral elements of the code are appropriately applied. Practices in relation to recording and maintaining records of breaches of the code are very good and short-term suspensions resulting from such breaches are very well managed. A review of the code of behaviour is a key priority for the board of management. This review is opportune and should ensure that the current practice of modifying the application of the code for students with special educational needs is documented and that similar consideration should be made for newcomer students. The review should be carried out with reference to Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools from the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and should utilise the audit tool available from the NEWB website (www.newb.ie).

The school adopts a holistic approach to managing student welfare. The pastoral work of the class tutors and year heads is supported by a care team which comprises the guidance team, and members of the faith team, together with the principal and deputy principal. Students experiencing difficulties in school or with poor discipline or attendance records are referred to the team and appropriate interventions are put in place. At the time of the inspection, the gender-balance on the care team was far from ideal and it is recommended that the composition of the team be reviewed. In addition to addressing the gender imbalance, the review should also consider how representatives of the year heads might be facilitated to attend the meetings of the care team.

From the school’s inception, management identified student attendance as a key area for improvement. A number of initiatives, including the appointment of an attendance co-ordinator, were put in place to address this. Tangible results of these initiatives are already in evidence and further improvement is anticipated with the introduction of a system to automatically alert parents by text each morning to their son’s or daughter’s absence. These developments offer further evidence of management’s innovative approach to running the school. In order to enhance the degree to which student attendance informs the operation of the care team, it is recommended that the attendance co-ordinator should form part of the team following the review mentioned above.

The students’ council plays an important role in the life of the school. It is consulted as an integral part of policy development and maintains a visible presence in the school through a
dedicated notice board. The student council plays a vital role in the student support system in the school. As part of the post of responsibility system, a teacher is assigned to liaise with and support the council in its work. The council is well established and properly constituted. It includes representatives from all year groups and formal elections are held annually with the elections linked to the school’s CSPE programme. The council meets regularly and a notice board outlining its structures and activities is located centrally for all students to access the information. Officers from the council meet informally with the school’s management to report on its activities. It is recommended that these meetings are formalised and that officers meet annually with the board to report on the council’s activities. Members of the council have attended recent meetings of Co. Laois Comhairle na nÓg and the liaison teacher has established contact with another school to develop the leadership capacity of the council. The council was consulted during the recent review of the school’s homework policy. Another key outcome from the work of this and previous councils is the canteen’s focus on healthy lunch provision. Members of the council were very positive in their view of the school and the educational and personal supports available to them.

1.4 Management of resources

The school buildings and grounds are very well maintained. Management has successfully garnered additional funding through the different building and maintenance programmes put in place by the Department of Education and Science. The condition of the school buildings and grounds is testament to the effective use that was made of this funding and to the commitment and expertise of the maintenance staff.

The school is very well resourced and the physical resources available to management are very well managed. Classrooms, in the main, are teacher based. This is very good practice as it allows the teachers to customise the classrooms to meet the needs of the students and to promote their own subject area. In some subject areas, classrooms are also clustered or co-located. This good practice, which provides a focus for the relevant department’s activities and which facilitates collaboration, should be replicated wherever possible.

The specialist rooms are well equipped and maintained and are, in the main, timetabled for optimum usage. The recreational and sporting facilities available to the school are also of a very high quality. Management’s next priority, in developing the school’s resources, is to enhance the functionality of the school’s library. It is intended to create a resource-rich facility to engage students in reading, to support their school work and to stimulate their interest in areas outside of their immediate academic pursuits. The School Library Association of Ireland (www.library.ie) is available to provide advice in relation to this work.

The information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure has undergone sustained development over the last number of years and an extensive system consisting of banks of computers in dedicated rooms and distributed units in classrooms is now in place. Most recently a number of computers connected via a wireless network were installed in the staff room. This provides teachers with enhanced opportunities to integrate ICT into lesson preparation and is a timely development. At the time of the inspection, the school had just been selected to participate in the 100mpbs Post Primary Schools Project and will, as a result, benefit from enhanced connectivity and will receive additional hardware. In order to maximise the benefits accruing from the existing infrastructure, to ensure its phased development and renewal, and to promote ICT integration into teaching and learning, it is recommended that a whole-school ICT plan be developed. All of the school’s stakeholders, particularly the various subject departments, should contribute to the development of the plan.
Coláiste Íosagáin has adopted a range of inclusive practices to meet the needs of a diverse population of students. The school has an allocation from the National Council for Special Education of 72.125 resource-teaching hours for eight students in the low incidence category and twenty-three in the high incidence category, as well as an allocation of one whole-time equivalent for learning support. Good systems are used to identify the needs of incoming students and a team of teachers led by the special education needs co-ordinator oversees the implementation of the special education needs programme with enthusiasm and care. To support the work of the team and to ensure equitable deployment of all of the special educational needs allocation, it is recommended that a transparent system to document how the allotted hours are deployed be but in place.

The school has a considerable number of students having English as an additional language (EAL) and an allocation of one whole-time equivalent is available to meet the needs of these students. The current provision lacks any real cohesion and should be reviewed. It is recommended that the review should lead to the creation of a system to assess the linguistic, cultural and social needs of the school’s newcomer students and to the appointment of a co-ordinator to manage the EAL programme. The co-ordinator should liaise with parents, lead the implementation of a whole-school literacy programme and raise awareness of teaching for cultural diversity. The senior management should also consider the future inclusion of EAL co-ordination and support within the post of responsibility structure given the numbers of students involved. This would further promote the full inclusion of newcomer students into all aspects of school life.

Tuition time, the length of the school week and the integrity of the school year are all in line with the relevant circulars. However teacher timetabling and the scheduling of classes need to be completely overhauled. It is therefore recommended that, in preparing future timetables, key stakeholders such as subject department co-ordinators, the special educational needs co-ordinator and the guidance counsellors, be consulted. The consultations should result in more effective and cohesive scheduling and should prevent recurrence of the current situation where subjects are scheduled several times on the same day and double periods for practical subjects are scheduled either side of the morning or lunch break. Consideration should be given to the creation of a team of people from the teaching staff each of whom could be trained in the use of timetabling software. The existence of such a team would guarantee that, in the event of changes at senior management level, sufficient expertise would remain in the school to produce a viable and efficient timetable. Furthermore, not all of the teachers are currently timetabled so that their class-contact time is maximised. In some instances the additional time is used to facilitate the teachers in carrying out various management functions. However, in others no such accommodation exists. This situation needs to be reviewed and every effort should be made to ensure any such inequities are addressed.

Management is keen to ensure that the school contributes to the social, sporting and cultural life of the local community. To this end, the school’s playing fields and gymnasium are accessible both to local clubs and national sporting bodies while other agencies, including local prayer groups, are welcome to use the school’s facilities when the need arises. This open and welcoming attitude is in keeping with the school’s ethos and is very good practice.

2. Quality of School Planning

2.1 The school plan

School development planning is well established and policy development is conducted in a collaborative and consultative manner. All policies are developed by sub-committees consisting of teachers, management, members of the board of management and parents.
Ratification of policies by the board of management only happens once a consultative process, involving the teaching staff, the parents’ council and the students’ council, is complete. These very good practices are indicative of the reflective and proactive manner in which the board of management and the senior management team approach their work. In order to inform ongoing planning and to embed a culture of analysis and reflection in the operation of the middle management, curricular and pastoral teams, it is recommended that management seeks an annual report from each of these groups outlining progress in line with agreed planning priorities.

Ongoing school development planning means that a significant bank of policies is now in place. Ideally the school would wish to develop or review at least two policies each year. In recent months, responsibility for identifying planning priorities and for initiating policy development and review has fallen to the principal. This is unsustainable in the long term and a planning team should be put in place to assume responsibility for this element of the planning process. Once in place, the planning team should conduct a complete review of the existing school plan and agree a process to address any anomalies that emerge. One obvious example is a policy on relationships and sexuality education (RSE). This is required by legislation and should be developed and implemented as soon as is practicable.

Subject department planning is also well underway. Planning co-ordinators are in place and subject department plans, many of a very high quality, have been developed. The minutes of subject department meetings indicate the comprehensive nature of the discussions that take place and the synergy that exists between the requirements of individual subject departments and whole-school planning priorities. The principal, when possible, attends planning meetings of individual departments. This is very good practice.

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

Apart from the provision in place for the learning-support classes, the school provides a broad and balanced curriculum in junior cycle. Mainstream classes in first year are mixed ability and are provided with a core of eleven subjects, which includes Science, and a choice of either French or German. All first-year students select an additional two subjects from a list of seven. The composition of the learning-support classes in junior cycle is outlined later in this report and should, in the interests of equity, be reviewed. It is recommended that following the review all future classes in first year are mixed ability and are provided with the same core subjects.

Subject provision in senior cycle is very good. Management is committed to the retention of minority subjects such as Physics, Chemistry and Music in senior cycle and also provides two modern European languages, three business subjects and a full suite of practical subjects. The school also provides Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.
As outlined earlier in this report, there are timetabling issues that need to be addressed. Apart from ensuring optimum use of the school’s teaching resources, the timetable is a key vehicle in efficient curriculum delivery and in facilitating subject-department planning. Future timetables should be informed by the requirements of individual subject departments. The need for concurrent timetabling in Mathematics to enable setting of classes in second year is just one such example.

TY has just recently been reintroduced following a major review of the programme that had been on offer and one mixed-ability class is now in place. The reintroduction of TY is evidence of the proactive approach adopted by the school in meeting the identified needs of the students. In keeping with good practice and to ensure that the new TY programme meets its intended objectives, it is recommended that it be subject to annual review. The review should ensure that there is joined-up planning across and within the different subject areas, that a range of teaching methods are utilised and that academic pursuits are not overemphasised during the year. It is further recommended that the content of the programme be reviewed annually and that, each year, it reflects the aptitudes, abilities and interests of the student cohort who select the programme.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Students transferring from the feeder primary schools benefit from a very good transfer programme which includes a short and intense taster programme. During the programme all first-year students sample seven subjects from which they select two. The present taster programme evolved following a review of earlier models and the level of co-operation in developing and trialling the new model is very impressive. In order to determine the effect of the taster programme on informing student subject choice, a survey of first-year students should be conducted as soon as the programme is completed each year. The outcomes of the analysis should then be used to further modify the programme if it is deemed necessary.

Procedures in relation to informing subject choice in senior cycle are equitable and student-centred. Students in third year and TY are provided with information sessions during the school day and an information evening for parents is also arranged. The school’s guidance counsellor discusses subject options with students during dedicated classes and parents and students are free to meet with the guidance counsellor if they so wish. Students opting for the established Leaving Certificate all take Irish, English and Mathematics and are presented with a list of subject options from which they select four. The results of their selections are analysed and a best-fit model is used to create the option bands. Parents and students alike expressed satisfaction with these arrangements.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

An excellent co-curricular and extracurricular programme is in place. The programme involves a wide-range of students and embraces the sporting, cultural and wider educational fields. The programme is characterised by the superb commitment of the teaching staff, by an admirable spirit of volunteerism and by the very productive links that have been established with the community. It is evident that the board of management, the senior management team and the wider staff regard the programme as a valuable core activity in the school.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning is well established and good progress is evident in the development of subject department plans. Subject co-ordinators are in place to lead and co-
ordinate the work of each department. In some instances co-ordination of the department’s activities has been the responsibility of one of the teachers for a number of years. Given the voluntary nature of the position, it would be preferable if the post of co-ordinator were to rotate between the members of the department. This would develop capacity within each subject department and provide each member with an opportunity to lead the on-going development of their subject area.

Subject teams hold regular meetings. It is laudable that an agenda is prepared and minutes are recorded for these meetings to facilitate continuity and track progress. A review of subject department minutes indicates that subject teams routinely plan for each academic year and issues such as classroom methodologies, assessment, continuous professional development and cross-curricular contacts are discussed. Of particular note is the culture of self-evaluation that is evident within some of the departments evaluated. For instance in some subjects it is evident that the outcomes of a detailed analysis of student outcomes in the state examinations has informed on-going planning in areas such as homework practices and the sequencing of content in the programme plans. This is very good practice.

Each subject department evaluated implements agreed schemes of work. These schemes are at various stages of development. Best practice was evident in instances where there was a clear focus on learning outcomes and where classroom practices and modes of assessment were closely informed by the information contained in the plan. To build on this very good practice, it is recommended that teaching strategies and resources that proved particularly effective in realising the identified learning outcomes be discussed at team meetings in order to share good practice and expertise.

There is significant scope to develop subject planning for TY. The current plans provide a list of the topics to be covered and refer to the types of teaching and assessment methods to be deployed. However, to optimise the learning potential of subjects in TY, it is recommended that all TY plans be reviewed and further developed. Each plan should be underpinned by a set of learning outcomes that identify key knowledge and skills that students will develop. The learning outcomes and teaching strategies deployed should be in keeping with the rationale underpinning the TY programme. In this context, the exploration of any Leaving Certificate material should be carried out in a way that is original and stimulating and significantly different from the approach taken during the Leaving Certificate programme. Assessment criteria should also be devised for each assessment component. These criteria should be shared with students and form the basis of feedback given on completed work.

Very good procedures are in place to provide teachers with a range of essential information on the needs and abilities of the students with additional needs and to inform the planning process. Some very good practice in the choice of teaching methods for learning-support classes was noted during the evaluation. Future planning meetings should consider mainstreaming these teaching methods. To enhance practice, it is commendable that the school has made a formal request to the Special Education Support Service for staff support. The school is now advised to conduct an audit of the staff’s professional development needs and in particular to build the existing capacity to more capably cope with students with additional learning and other needs. Ongoing staff development should focus on differentiated teaching and on the employment of a wider range of teaching methodologies than is currently the case.

A good range of resources has been developed within most subject departments. Individual teachers have also collated some very good resources. In one subject area the development of ICT resources for use in teaching and learning is to be commended. However there is scope to explore the potential of ICT to support the teaching and learning of other subject areas.
4.2 Learning and teaching

In general, the lessons observed during the inspection were well planned. This was evident in the structured nature and appropriate pace of the lessons, and in the advance preparation of the various resources and support materials used during the lessons.

All lessons were conducted in a positive atmosphere where students’ efforts were affirmed and encouraged. The good rapport evident between students and teachers was reflected in the attractive learning environment created in the school through the display of student work and achievement in many areas of the school building.

Good practice was observed in the clear focus of many lessons and where the planned learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of each lesson. This good practice could be developed further by greater use of this strategy across all lessons and by reviewing the learning outcomes at the end of lessons.

Very good use was made in many lessons of teaching resources such as video clips, handouts and whiteboards to support student learning. Though very good use was made of ICT in some lessons, especially where such resources were used in an interactive dynamic way, this is a resource of which greater use could be made.

In the majority of lessons, effective use was made of text-based resources such as handouts, worksheets and the subject textbook. This approach complemented a more specific attention to the development of student’s literacy skills observed in some lessons. However, situations where the textbook was the primary teaching resource should be avoided.

In many lessons, very good use was made of questioning strategies designed to assess and enhance students’ knowledge and understanding of the lesson content. Best practice was evident where there was a good balance between directed and open questions and where questions engaged students in higher-order thinking.

Independent and active learning was encouraged in many lessons through the use of group or pair work and practical activities. In all cases students engaged with such work in a lively, enthusiastic and co-operative manner. It was evident that students were skilled and competent in completing the tasks required of them throughout the lessons observed. However, in some cases the link between the practical activity and the theoretical aspects of the course could have been more clearly developed. Thus, it is suggested that some further consideration be given to developing and sharing good practice in this area.

Though many elements of good practice were observed across all of the subject areas, it is also clear from the subject inspection reports that the overall quality of teaching and learning would benefit from the sharing of such elements within and between subject departments. Hence, it is recommended that the school explore means of achieving this as part of the on-going professional development of the staff.

4.3 Assessment

Coláiste Íosagáin has established collaborative formal and informal practices in relation to assessing student progress. A range of assessment modes is in use and student attainment levels in the subjects evaluated are generally very good. Formative assessment occurs in classrooms through activities such as oral questioning, monitoring levels of student participation, class tests, the monitoring of project and practical work and through the provision and correction of homework. An examination of student copybooks and folders indicated that a range of homework activities is assigned and corrected on a regular basis.
Inspectors noted that some teachers use positive comments to good effect when correcting and assessing written work. This good practice should be adopted by all of the teachers in the school. The school has developed a whole-school homework policy in consultation with all the partners in the school community. This is commendable. However, this policy is not applicable to students in the LCA programme. The school is urged to reconsider this practice in light of the many accepted benefits to learning that are associated with homework.

Summative assessment is provided in the form of mock examinations for third-year and sixth-year classes each March and school examinations for other classes at the end of the Christmas and summer terms. Many subject departments use common examinations with agreed marking schemes to facilitate assessment of individual and class performance throughout a year group and this is commended. The allocation of some marks for the completion of practical activities in Science and Home Economics during the school examinations is good practice as it reinforces the value of this class work.

The school has established a creditable practice of assessing and tracking students’ literacy attainment throughout the junior cycle. The school also assesses the general ability of all students entering first year. This information is considered during class placement and aids the teachers in understanding the learning potential of each student. Students with special educational needs or learning difficulties are assessed for their eligibility for reasonable accommodations in the state exams and applications are made on behalf of those deemed eligible.

Cumulative records of student attendance and assessment outcomes are maintained by teachers and used to inform students and parents of the progress made. These records provide a means for the school to track individual progress and to advise students on the selection of subjects, levels and programmes. Feedback on effort and attainment is provided to students on a regular basis. Results are formally communicated to parents by means of reports and at scheduled parent-teacher meetings. There was evidence of good participation rates and achievement in Mathematics, Home Economics and History, but the uptake of higher-level Science and Chemistry and the outcomes for students in these subjects in state examinations are identified as a cause for concern. It is recommended that the issue of poor performance identified in the science department’s own analysis of the 2009 examination results be addressed as a matter of urgency.

5. Quality of Support for Students

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school welcomes students with a wide range of abilities and includes students requiring learning support and students with disabilities. Considering the school’s inclusive nature, it is unfortunate that the admissions policy refers to the school’s ‘right to delay the commencement of an applicant’s admission pending the provision of required resources or required information’. This statement does not reflect the reality of the school’s inclusive practices and should be re-considered in the scheduled review of this policy.

Support for students identified with special educational needs or in need of learning support is provided primarily through the formation of a discreet, small learning-support class in each year of the junior cycle. These classes are provided with a reduced curriculum and receive additional classes in Mathematics and English. Students in these classes do not have access to Science or to a modern European language. While acknowledging the school’s earnest desire to meet the needs of this cohort of students, it is recommended that the current provision be reviewed. The review should consider discontinuing the learning-support class in first year and extending the mixed-ability model to include the entire first-
year cohort. Some subjects such as Mathematics should then be set in second and third year. The resource hours should be used to facilitate interventions such as team teaching, in-class co-operative support and limited withdrawal in each year of the junior cycle.

The school has established a team consisting of the special educational needs co-ordinator, the reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations (RACE) co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor and a tutor to oversee the provision for students with special educational needs in the school. The team meets once each term. Arrangements should be put in place to enable the team to meet more frequently and the roles and responsibilities of each member of the team should be agreed and documented. This would provide valuable support to the co-ordinator and would facilitate a more equitable distribution of the work of the team.

The student body reflects the diversity of the local community and includes students from minority and other groups including those for whom English is an additional language (EAL). For those EAL students, the school provides English language support where required. Up to now responsibility for this support has rested with the special-needs and learning-support department. The school’s management accepts that there is scope to improve the use of the Department’s allocated teaching resource and has recently recruited a teacher who will provide specific targeted support for EAL students. This is a welcome development. This will provide additional support for the work of teachers in this area and ensure a wider communication of appropriate teaching aims and methodologies. It is also evident that the school endeavours to ensure that documentation provided to all parents, but especially the parents of these students, is clear and unambiguous.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The guidance allocation is used effectively to provide a range of educational, personal and career supports for students. The department comprises two qualified guidance counsellors who play an important role in many aspects of school life including curriculum support and student care. The school’s guidance plan is currently under review and is expected to be ratified by the board within the current school year. One aspect that should be included within the plan is an appropriate system for the formal tracking of student progression on the completion of second-level education.

Central to the guidance provision is the support for students at key transition stages at both junior and senior cycle. Included within the draft guidance plan is specific targeted support for incoming first-year students to improve their transition to second level. This student-centred approach is indicative of the close links between the guidance and student-care systems in the school.

It was evident during the evaluation that guidance within the school was viewed as a whole-school activity and was integrated into all the school’s programmes. The guidance department is centrally involved in information sessions provided to parents of incoming first-year students and those progressing to senior cycle. Copies of presentation materials used indicate that the information presented is structured and clear. There was also evidence that the implications of subject choice at junior cycle, both in terms of meeting students current needs and of possible career and further studies options, are set out. The guidance department also works informally with subject departments including SPHE to offer supports where there are common themes between guidance and other subjects and programmes.

Students progressing into the range of senior cycle programmes available are provided with a variety of supports including an information evening and are given the opportunity to complete Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs). Students then discuss the outcomes of these
tests with the school’s guidance counsellor. This very good practice provides students with valuable assistance in making appropriate subject and career choices. The involvement of the guidance department in this analysis and in the consequent structuring of subject options for senior cycle is commended. The school’s management reported over ninety percent accommodation of student preferences in the current academic year.

Students can avail of Guidance and counselling support throughout their time in the school and seek referral through year heads, class tutors and teachers. The provision of Guidance is generally managed through one-to-one or small-group sessions. Personal counselling support for students is also provided. However, when deemed necessary students are referred, after consultation with parents and the student-care structures, to relevant outside agencies and supports.

A dedicated office for Guidance is provided within the school. It is suitably equipped and well located in order to allow full access to students wishing to make appointments to meet with the Guidance counsellors to seek information on career or personal issues.

A significant strength of the school’s provision is the quality of the student-care system. This was apparent from the interactions at school level and the views expressed by parents and the board. The student-care system in the school centres on the relationships between year heads, class tutors and class teachers. Primary responsibility for the achievement of the pastoral goals of the school rests with the class teacher, as is appropriate. A well-organised pastoral care team is in place. The team meets weekly and comprises key members of the school staff including the principal, and guidance counsellor. Year heads meet each fortnight and either the principal or deputy principal attends both team meetings in order to maintain an open communication channel between the pastoral-care and year-head groups.

Closely aligned to the work of both groups is the work of the disciplinary committee. This committee is responsible for final stage adjudication of breaches of the code of behaviour. Occasionally during the evaluation it became evident that there was duplication in the work of the disciplinary committee and the pastoral care groups. It is important that the school’s management team ensure there is clear delineation in the work of each group.

The year-head and class-tutor system works closely with class teachers to promote the positive pastoral approach evident in the school. This system is supported by the very good work of the school’s chaplaincy service. The chaplaincy service is shared between a part-time parish-based chaplain and a member of one of the trustee orders who is currently on the school’s teaching staff. The chaplains play a central role in linking the school’s ethos with student care and the spiritual development of the school community. As well as supporting students, the chaplaincy role involves support of the school community in general.

Though effective support structures are in place and a culture of care is evident in the interactions and ethos of the school, the formal pastoral care policy has not been updated since the school’s amalgamation. The revision of the school’s pastoral care policy should be prioritised as a planning objective. The revised policy should recognise the very good practice evident at school level. It should also formalise and align the existing structures and reflect the shared ethos of the school as it is now.

Coláiste Íosagáin participates in the Meitheal programme that is run by the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. Under this programme, ten fifth-year students are selected, following an application and interview process, to become Meitheal leaders in the school. The successful candidates attend training during the summer holidays at the end of fifth year and, upon their return in September, take an active role in the induction and ongoing care of the school’s first-year students. Each Meitheal leader assumes responsibility for
approximately thirteen students. The active involvement of students in the school’s pastoral care provision is very good practice.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The board of management, the senior management team and the teaching staff contribute very effectively to the running of the school.
- There are very good administrative and planning systems in place. The school demonstrates a willingness to reflect on the quality of the service it provides, to amend the existing provision and to provide additional interventions if it is deemed appropriate.
- The school provides a broad and balance curriculum and has been very successful in retaining a number of key minority subjects.
- The school is caring and inclusive and provides very good support for its students.
- Guidance is a whole-school activity and contributes very positively to the school particularly during key transitions.
- A very warm atmosphere permeates the school. Student behaviour and interactions between the staff and students and between the students themselves are respectful and courteous.
- Management and staff are committed to catering for students in need of learning support or with special educational needs.

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

- Teacher timetabling and the scheduling of classes needs to be completely overhauled. The future preparation of timetables should involve consultation with key stakeholders such as subject department co-ordinators, the special educational needs co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor.
- In order to ensure that the recently modified TY programme meets its intended objectives, it is recommended that it is subject to annual review. The review should ensure that there is joined-up planning across and within the different subject areas, that a range of teaching methods are utilised and that academic pursuits are not overemphasised during the year. It is further recommended that the content of the programme be reviewed annually and that each year it reflect the aptitudes, abilities and interests of the student cohort who select the programme.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning would benefit from the systematic sharing of existing good practice within and between subject departments. Hence, it is recommended that the school explore means of achieving this as part of the ongoing professional development of the staff.
- It is recommended that the utilisation of resource hours be clearly documented to verify that they are being used for their intended purpose and that the provision for EAL students be delivered in a more coherent and co-ordinated fashion.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
7. **RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS**

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

1. Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 18 September 2009
2. Subject Inspection of Home Economics – 23 November 2009
3. Subject Inspection of Science and Chemistry – 26 November 2009
4. Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs – 26 November 2009
5. Subject Inspection of History – 30 November 2009

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