

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

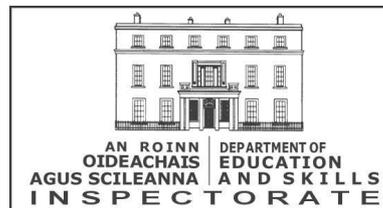
Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning**

REPORT

**Firhouse Community College
Firhouse Road, Dublin 24
Roll number: 70140L**

Date of inspection: 16 January 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January, 2012 in Firhouse Community College. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

Firhouse Community College was established in 1982 as a designated Community College under the auspices of the County Dublin Vocational Education Committee. The school is co-educational and caters for a diverse multicultural student population. The motto of the school is '*Educating for excellence in a caring community*' and it aims to achieve this through the provision of a wide range of subjects and programmes. Enrolment has increased steadily over recent years and at present there are 648 students attending the school.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management provides effective leadership and support to the school.
- School development planning is an ongoing process which has facilitated change and improvements.
- The very good leadership by the senior management team, and the commitment of the staff, has resulted in a very well-run and managed school.
- In line with the school's ethos, students are dealt with in a caring and supportive manner and good structures are in place to provide for their learning support and personal development needs.
- The school provides a very broad curriculum and a wide range of subjects.
- The school is well maintained and significant investment has been made in information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was good. Very good practice was evident where *assessment for learning* (AfL) strategies were used to enhance the learning experience for students. However, there was scope for greater use of such strategies across all lessons.
- A shortfall in the number of hours of instruction provided to students remains an issue to be resolved by the school.
- The school has a strong culture of self review and has a good capacity to effect school improvement.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- With respect to school improvement, it is recommended that the board set out more measurable targets in terms of the student outcomes it hopes to achieve.

- In order to assist in the coordination of school development planning, it is recommended that an overarching school development planning committee be established.
- It is recommended that further sharing of good practice with respect to the use of ICT, differentiation and AfL strategies in teaching and learning be facilitated through subject department and whole-staff meetings.
- It is recommended that the school prioritise compliance with the requirements regarding instruction time as outlined in Circular M29/95.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management provides effective leadership and support to the operation and development of Firhouse Community College. It is well organised, meets regularly and keeps a good record of its activities. Good practice is also evident in the provision of training for members of the board.

The board has a strong link with the senior management of the school and is well informed of the activities and current issues of the school through reports from the principal, staff and parents at board meetings. The board works closely with the school in considering how to progress issues such as school development planning, infrastructure development and discipline. Care is taken to ensure that all issues are followed through to completion. The value which the board places on consultation with the school community is particularly evident in the annual meetings it has with the students' council.

The board plays an active role in school development planning through its involvement in the development, ratification and review of school policies. Through its involvement in school development planning, the board aims to preserve and promote the school's ethos as a caring and inclusive school.

The board has identified areas for the future development of the school such as the further development of ICT resources, developing a literacy and numeracy action plan and development of the library. However, the specific outcomes it is hoped to achieve for students on completion of such developmental work are not identified. Thus, it is recommended that the board set out more measurable targets with respect to school improvement. It would be worthwhile for the board to engage in some quantitative, as well as qualitative, analysis of the outcomes achieved by the school. For example, the board could specify the improvements it would like to see in literacy levels or reading habits following the development of the library.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

The school's priorities for development

School development planning is seen as an ongoing process in Firhouse Community College and considerable effort has been made to ensure that improvements in provision for students have resulted from the planning process. Priorities have been identified by senior management, in consultation with staff, through annual school development days and other ongoing consultations. A holistic view of school development is evident in the

categorisation of future priorities into infrastructural issues and issues relating to the curriculum and teaching and learning.

Priorities for the current school year include: review of the school's health and safety statement; upgrading of the ICT facilities; library refurbishment; development of a literacy and numeracy strategy; and completion of the building works to make the school accessible to all. Clear action plans for each of these areas have been devised and progress has been carefully monitored. Senior management plays a key role in devising and implementing the various actions plans and is assisted by staff working groups or committees. In past years, it was possible to allocate some responsibility for coordinating school development planning to an assistant principal. However, this is no longer possible. Thus, in order to assist senior management in the coordination of school development planning, it is recommended that an overarching school development planning committee be established. Establishing such a committee would also provide an opportunity to share the experience in leading in this area and to build expertise across the staff.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The overall quality of leadership of staff is very good. The senior management team is very capable and brings complementary strengths to a team approach to managing the school. As a result, the school is very well managed and organised. Staff and resources are well managed and the senior management team is very proactive in dealing with issues. As mentioned previously, they also play a key role in school development planning.

Staff are motivated by, and committed to, the development and success of the school. As one teacher expressed it "*we run it together, it is our school*". Staff are facilitated and encouraged to attend professional development courses. They are given opportunities to lead out on initiatives through their involvement in various staff committees. In the current year alone, there are up to fifteen such committees working on areas such as school promotion, the Green School initiative, and staff-day planning. Consultation and collaboration with staff is further facilitated by regular formal meetings of the whole staff and of groups such as the Transition Year (TY) team, and the student-support team. Very good use is made of a weekly newsletter and a staff handbook to keep staff informed of ongoing issues and events. The college's administrative and other support staff also play an important role in the effective operation of the school.

The school has a range of posts of responsibility and key functions of the management of the school are carried out by post holders. Responsibilities in the areas of year head, TY coordination and development of ICT are allocated to assistant principals, while a variety of duties are assigned to special duties posts. The efficient completion of the duties associated with all posts is integral to the smooth running of the school. In conjunction with a decrease in the number of allocated posts, the existing schedule of posts is under review in order to ensure that it meets the school's current priorities and needs. This review is timely and good practice.

Over and above the formal roles devolved to posts of responsibility, it was evident that all staff contribute greatly to the life of the school. For example, teachers act as class tutors and, along with the year heads, play an important role in supporting students in their academic, personal and social development. A wide range of extracurricular activities is supported voluntarily by staff and the majority of students are involved in some after-school activities. However, a minority indicated that they were not involved in such activities. It would be worthwhile for the school to explore the reasons behind this in order to ensure that as wide a range of needs as possible are being met. The students' council could assist in carrying out some research in this regard.

Leadership of students

The quality leadership of students is very good. In line with the school's ethos, students are dealt with in a caring and supportive manner. Good structures are in place to provide for the learning-support and personal-development needs of students. The result of the school's commitment to assisting students to "*strive for excellence*" is evident in the confident, well-mannered, articulate young people encountered during the evaluation.

Good systems are in place to administer the admission of new students in first year. An annual re-enrolment process for students in all other years ensures that the school has up-to-date information on each student. Good systems are also in place to monitor punctuality and attendance. These systems will be further enhanced by the implementation of an e-portal system.

The school makes considerable efforts to provide parents and students with information to assist in their decision making at important transition points such as transferring from junior to senior cycle. Though the vast majority of parents are very satisfied with the level of information they receive on their child's progress, a minority expressed some dissatisfaction with the level of advice they receive regarding subject choices. Thus, it is suggested that the school review the current arrangements in order to investigate if any further measures are required to equip parents and students to make informed choices.

As well as having a clear code of behaviour, the school places a strong emphasis on reinforcing positive behaviour. For example, an awards scheme rewards achievement in both academic and non-academic activities. Good opportunities are provided for students to have a say in school life through initiatives such as the students' council, the Green Schools committee and the prefect system. However, a survey of students showed that some felt that they did not have a say in how to make the school a better place. It is suggested that the school explore means of raising the profile of the students' council and awareness of the contribution students can make to school life.

The school provides a very broad curriculum and a wide range of subjects. The curricular programmes provided by the school are well organised. The school is planning further development of the curriculum possibly through the introduction of another language.

The TY programme is compulsory and thus plays a significant part in the experience of students during their time in the school. The programme provides valuable opportunities for students to grow and mature.

Timetabling of subjects is generally good and in line with syllabus guidelines. However, some non-practical subjects are timetabled for double lessons, some double lessons for practical subjects are spread across a break and some subjects are timetabled for two separate single periods in the same day. While acknowledging that efforts have been made to minimise such occurrences, it is recommended that the school continue to explore ways of refining the timetable.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school has been well maintained and provides an open and attractive learning environment. The school has a good range of specialist and non-specialist classrooms, technology rooms, laboratories, a hall, a gymnasium and playing fields.

Upgrading the building and facilities has been approached in a phased manner. For example, the science laboratories have been refurbished in recent years; an elevator is being installed in the current year; and the future use of an unused technology room is currently under consideration.

The school has made a significant investment in providing ICT facilities such as interactive whiteboards in all classrooms. Training in the use of these facilities has also been provided for staff. The implementation of an e-portal system for monitoring and tracking attendance and assisting in school administration is currently underway as part of this initiative.

An awareness and commitment to environmental sustainability is evident in the work of the Green Schools committee.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The overall quality of teaching and learning was good. Features of very good practice were evident in many of the lessons observed.

Very good quality teaching and learning was characterised by a student-centred and active approach to learning. Students' active engagement in learning was supported through strategies such as discussion and questioning, the completion of worksheets, and practical activities. Good use was made of a variety of methodologies to facilitate learning. Classroom management was good and the lessons were conducted in a very supportive atmosphere. It was evident that teachers know their students well and gave a lot of affirmative feedback and encouragement to the students. Attention was given to the literacy and numeracy needs of students. It was clear from the structure, pacing and resources used that lessons had been well prepared in advance.

Lesson content was communicated clearly. In particular, good use was made of ICT resources to present information and to aid the learning process. The introduction of ICT to the classroom is a relatively new development in the school and great progress has been made in its integration into the everyday teaching and learning in the classroom. Good practice is evident in the ongoing focus on the training needs of teachers with regard to the use of ICT and it is recommended that further sharing of good practice between colleagues be facilitated through subject department and whole-staff meetings.

The school has focused on the introduction of AfL methodologies in recent years. Such approaches were particularly evident where the quality of teaching and learning was very good. In these cases, the intended learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of lessons and used again at the end of lessons to review whether or not they had been achieved. Questioning during the lessons included an appropriate balance of higher-order and lower-order questions and students were given sufficient time to formulate their answers. Lesson content was differentiated to cater for the mixed-ability nature of the class groups. Opportunities were provided for peer and self assessment and students were made aware of what was required to improve their learning. However, there is scope for greater use of these strategies across all lessons and it is recommended that subject departments would further facilitate the sharing of good practice in this regard. For example, teaching methodologies could be included for discussion at all subject department meetings. Analysis of student outcomes, such as examination results and uptake of levels, could complement this focus on teaching and learning by identifying what is working well and areas for improvement.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The school has given serious consideration to the recommendations from previous inspection reports and most recommendations have been implemented in a timely manner. For example, an additional period per week has been allocated to English in third year and the incidences of double periods for Mathematics have been reduced.

However, a shortfall in the number of hours of instruction provided to students highlighted previously in a 2007 TY programme evaluation remains an issue to be resolved. Second-year and third-year students are timetabled for forty-two lesson periods which is equivalent to the required minimum 28 hours of instruction per week. Other year groups receive less than this allocation. It is recommended that the school prioritises compliance with the requirements regarding instruction time as outlined in Circular M29/95.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Recommendations regarding teaching and learning from previous inspection reports have been carefully considered by the school and relevant subject departments. Great progress has been made in implementing recommendations regarding subject planning, and the provision of resources such as ICT. Subject plans are well developed and provide a comprehensive framework for the work of individual subject departments. The quality of ICT resources available for use in the classroom is very good. Good attention has been given to the development of AfL approaches to teaching and learning. However, as mentioned previously, the integration of ICT and the further development of AfL approaches is an ongoing focus of school development planning and it is recommended that the school facilitate the sharing of good practice in these areas both within and between subject departments.

5. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The school has a strong culture of review and self evaluation. For example, staff are surveyed to judge the success of staff-development days, the TY programme and in-service events. A focus on the self evaluation by teachers of their practice, which was the focus of a recent staff meeting, is very good practice. Parents' views have also been sought both through surveys, such as one on the effectiveness of the TY programme and through the parents' association. Regular meetings with the students' council facilitate the collection of their views.

Careful consideration and self review of progress has led to many improvements in the operation of the school. For example, school and subject planning are well advanced, refurbishment projects have been completed, and teachers' professional development has been provided for. The recommendations from previous inspection reports have for the most part been implemented or addressed. The school monitors and evaluates the implementation of all initiatives and decisions, and an annual progress report is prepared for the VEC. However, as mentioned previously, it would be useful for the school to set out more measurable targets in terms of the outcomes it is hoped to achieve for students through school development planning.

Firhouse Community College is a well-organised and managed school. It has shown itself to be responsive to the needs of its students and has adapted well to suit changing circumstances. The board and staff are committed to ensuring that their school continues to operate as a high-quality learning community. Analysis of survey results indicated a high level of satisfaction among parents and students with the education and care provided by this school. The school has a good capacity to effect school improvement.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report.

The Board of Management welcomes this very positive Whole School Evaluation report which recognises and acknowledges that Firhouse Community College operates as a high quality learning environment which deals with its students in a caring and supportive manner. The Report is also affirming of the very good leadership by the senior management team and the commitment of all staff to the development and success of the school. The high level of satisfaction among parents and students with the education and care provided by the school is also acknowledged. Furthermore, the Board is pleased to note that the Inspectors made special mention of the confident, well-mannered and articulate young people they encountered during the evaluation.

The Board would like to thank all members of the school community who were involved in the evaluation process. The Board would also like to record its appreciation to the two Inspectors for conducting the evaluation in a courteous, respectful and professional manner.

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

The Board of Management at its meeting of 2nd October 2012 reviewed the Report in detail and is committed to addressing all the suggestions and recommendations in the Report. A school development planning committee has been formed to assist in the coordination of school development planning. This will also assist the Board in setting out measurable targets with respect to further school improvement. Teachers are committed to further sharing of good practice with respect to the use of ICT, differentiation and AfL strategies in teaching and learning through subject department meetings and whole-staff meetings. The Board will prioritise compliance with the requirements regarding instruction time.